The Glory
GARAGE



Growing up Lebanese Muslim in Australia

Nadia Jamal &
Taghred Chandab



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Taghred Chandab worked at *The Daily Telegraph* before becoming media and public relations manager for the National Soccer League. She was a producer of 2UE's Steve Price show and more recently a freelance producer at the ABC. Now she has a business called Undercover – Modest Clothing for Modest Women, which specialises in stylish garments for Muslim and other women.

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To Mum, Dad, Hanadi, Kamal, Nahida and Abdul Karim. You're the best. N.J.

To Mum, Dad, Amna, Nader, Mazen, Maher, Hayan, Hussein, my husband Tarek and my nieces Tenisha, Myah and Yasmeen. You are my inspiration. T.C.

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From the Authors

We have quite a few *nevers* to our names. We never went on a school camp, we never wore a swimming costume and we never slept over at a friend's place. As Muslims, we were told it was *haram* (forbidden, in Arabic) to do these things. Strictly speaking, none of this was about our religion, but our families' version of Lebanese Muslim culture in Australia. We can go on a camp, only we can't share a room with boys; sometimes we can wear a swimming costume in the company of other girls, but not in the presence of men; and we can sleep at a friend's house, only her brothers can't be around.

As young girls, these things seemed important and fun, but now that we are older and can reflect on them, we believe that the caution exercised by our parents – whether motivated by religion or culture or both – brought a valuable kind of discipline into our lives.

Our lives can be contradictory at times. This is because we participate in a secular society that has social customs that can run counter to our faith. We have worked out where we fit culturally and socially, but there is still conflict about work (do we join our colleagues for after-work drinks when alcohol is haram?), home life (moving out is not an option until marriage) and boys (we are not supposed to have kissed one unless we are married). These are some of the tensions with which we are left to grapple.

Sometimes we rebel against traditions, while at other times we feel blessed to be part of a heritage that has made us richer human beings. Family life is celebrated and there is warmth and a strong sense of goodwill when we come together for events such as the Eid festivals. But sometimes it is hard not to feel like we live in two worlds.

Taghred Chandab: At home I had to behave and dress in a certain way to avoid conflict. I wasn't allowed to wear shorts or a singlet when my father and brothers were around. My relationship with my family deteriorated in my teens because I felt as though my parents wanted to shelter me from the world. I wasn't allowed to go anywhere with my friends, not even to the movies. The first time I went to the movies I was eighteen. But what angered me more was watching my brothers treat our house like a hotel. When I complained I was given the excuse, 'they're boys and you're a girl'.

But I also have happy childhood memories. I remember

my father taking us all to Lakemba Mosque to mark the end of Ramadan and begin celebrations for the Eid. I was surrounded by thousands of other Muslims and it was exciting. Then we would go home to feast on dishes such as stuffed vine leaves and cabbage rolls, which my mother had prepared the day before. All day on the Eid I would gorge on chocolates and traditional Lebanese sweets, such as *maamoul*, a biscuit stuffed with dates or the walnut version that is covered in icing sugar.

I was the first Muslim my school friends had known. My parents are devout Muslims but they enrolled my sister, my brothers and me in a Catholic secondary school for a few years. They were keen on the discipline the Catholic system offered. My parents believed they had instilled enough Islamic faith in us that it would not be shaken if they sent us to a school that taught a different religion. We were among the first non-Catholics to be accepted into the school. My school uniform carried the school emblem and one time my mum tried to sew a patch over it because it had the cross on it. We carried the Bible when we attended religion classes and we couldn't ask for an exemption because we were Muslim. We had to observe Catholic practices even though we didn't believe in them.

As a teenager I spent more time inside a church than a mosque. I am familiar with the proceedings at mass but I still have to follow other people during an Islamic gathering. My brothers and I would sit together during communion and watch our friends get up to accept the bread and wine. That was one thing we didn't have to do.

Many younger Muslims fear even sticking their head into a church, but my time in a Catholic school has taught me to respect churches as place of worship, in the same way I respect a mosque.

When Ramadan approached each year everyone knew about it because I would sit out of all sporting events. I didn't have any food or water during the day so I had no energy to take part. Sometimes Ramadan fell at the same time as Lent, so my friends had to stop eating certain foods and I didn't feel so left out. Still, they could eat some foods and I'd have to wait until sunset. Sometimes I stuffed myself with chocolate bars I had stashed in my locker. I didn't care if someone saw me because I knew no Muslims were around to dob me in to my parents.

Nadia Jamal: Growing up Muslim in a public school, I would sing carols during the Christmas concert and make cardboard hats with chocolate eggs for Easter parades in the school playground. My mum even bought me the eggs. Like all the other kids I wanted to win one of the prizes for best hat. But despite my efforts I never did.

And there was no escaping the making of Christmas cards in class. Even as I got older I looked forward to handing out cards to my teachers and friends, including my Muslim ones, who reciprocated with their own Christmas cards.

I never objected to singing Christmas carols. Actually, it was fun. But as I got a bit older and the self-consciousness

kicked in, I began to feel confused. I knew other people who felt the same way. I remember thinking I was somehow compromising my religion, but I wasn't sure how. I was young and all I knew was that singing Christ was the Lord was wrong, and that I shouldn't like Jesus. It wasn't until I was older that I realised Muslims love Jesus too. It's just that we don't believe he is God's son. To Muslims, he is a prophet.

This is not to say that public schools are not sensitive to the diverse religious beliefs of students. They are. My teenage brother, Abdul Karim, prays with his friends in an empty classroom at lunchtime, and some schools offer uniforms that specifically cater for Muslim girls.

The calendar is based on the Christian calendar, and when there are public holidays for Christmas I always put my hand up to work because I don't celebrate the occasion.

But there are many misconceptions about Islam and Muslims. A few of the common allegations are that Muslim women have no rights, and they are forced to wear the hijab and to be subordinate to their husbands.

Jamila Hussain is in a better position than most to address the criticisms. She is a convert to Islam and lectures in Islamic law. Jamila explains that more than 1400 years ago, the Koran gave women rights that were unprecedented in the world at the time. It wasn't until the late 19th century and even 20th century that Western women caught up. For example, Muslim women had spiritual equality, the right to an independent legal

personality, the right to own property and the right to divorce.

'According to the Koran, women are the "twin halves" of men and equal to them,' says Jamila. 'There are some situations where men and women are treated differently – inheritance, for example – but this is about gender equity rather than gender equality. In Islamic law, men have financial responsibilities that women don't. For example, a man is always obliged to support his wife, regardless of her financial position.' So what has kept many Muslim women down? The answer is the same as in many other communities: patriarchal cultures. 'Anyone who doubts this should look at the legal position of women in England and Europe before the 20th century,' says Jamila.

Some practices, including honour killings and female circumcision, are abominable, but Jamila explains that they are cultural practices, not Islamic. War and colonialism in countries such as Lebanon have blurred the lines between culture and religion, and this has greatly affected the lives of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular. Many rules that are held up as Islamic are in fact cultural. It is often hard to separate the two because Islam is not just a way of thinking, it is a way of being.

We are writing this book because there have been critical and damaging things written and said about Muslims, especially the Lebanese who follow this religion. We felt there was a need to give you an insight into the everyday dilemmas that some of us face growing up in a

secular society. This book is just a slice of that life, and should not be read as the definitive book on the community. Some of these experiences might ring true even if you are not Lebanese and Muslim. These are stories of real people, although some names and details have been changed.

We also hope that you will learn something about Islam from reading this book. Islam is a set of religious instructions that cover all the essential aspects of life. It gives us guidance about how to live our lives in our best interest, and this can remove many uncertainties. In particular, we have tried to highlight some of the key principles of Islam, including the five pillars, or foundations, of the religion.

The Glory Garage

CHECKLIST

Pots and pans ~ 16

Wok ~ 1

Dinner sets ~ 16

Vases ~ 8

56-piece cutlery sets ~ 2

Teacups and saucers ~ 24

Coffee cups and saucers ~ 24

Drinking glasses ~ 36

Crystal bowls ~ 3

Pasta bowls ~ 2 with matching plates ~ 8

Salad bowls ~ 3

Fruit platters ~ 10

Sandwich platters ~ 4

Cake platters ~ 2

Welcome to my glory garage: the brick room I've taken over in the backyard of my parents' home. The first thing you see when you walk in are the piles of boxes stacked high against the walls. They're clearly marked with my name in case other family members confuse their stuff with mine.

I'm doing my annual stocktake, and I've even managed to coax my teenage brother into helping me. No, I don't work for Myer or David Jones and I don't plan to sell any of it. I'm just making sure I don't need to buy any more pots, plates or drinking glasses. Now that I've seen the list, what do I plan to do with sixteen dinner sets? There's enough there for three families!

I have termed this obsession with collecting household items for married life 'the glory garage syndrome'. It's a behavioural pattern that affects many Lebanese girls long before an engagement ring is on their finger. The glory garage can also be a cupboard, a spare room or the space under a bed, but it's a must-have for Lebanese girls.

The collection is commonly referred to as a girl's *jihaz* (or trousseau, a French word meaning a bride's outfit, linen and other items for domestic life). Most girls have their mothers starting their collections for them in their early teens, or around puberty, although some girls do not officially start their collection until they get engaged.

It isn't about inheriting family heirlooms or a small box of treasured hand-me-downs. We are talking serious shopping here. And it's not unusual for mothers and their

daughters to shop three or four times a week to build up their collections. Mothers know the big-ticket items their daughters will need so they can also shop for these alone.

So what are the benefits of the glory garage? As it can be an expensive custom, girls are advised to buy pieces over a long period of time, which means it's not the financial burden it can be when you have to rush to buy things at the last minute. As well, you can keep an eye out for the sales and purchase items at reduced prices.

I'm always on the lookout for a bargain and I have become expert at hunting down items for discount factory prices.

Exhibit A: Wedgewood clock
Retail price: $195.00
Sale price: $105.00

I have been known to walk through the furniture section in department stores and to admire the leather sofas. But they are out of the question for my glory garage. There's simply no room for them. The thought of hiring storage space crosses my mind, but I quickly talk myself out of it. That would be too ridiculous.

I don't buy one dinner set at a time. I have to have three sets or at least two. The women who sell them to me can't understand why I need so many, but Lebanese dinners are rarely on a small scale.

• • •

I also have:
Bedspreads ~ 3
Bed sheets ~ 8
Bath towels ~ 30
Picture frames ~ 5
Teapots ~ 3 with matching cream and sugar bowls ~ 6
Tens of miniature Spode

No glory garage would be complete without a product known to all women with Lebanese blood: Bessemer. The Australian company's cookware looms large in the lives of Lebanese families. It's a staple item in most glory spaces and you'd be hard pressed to find a kitchen that doesn't feature at least half a dozen of its classic pots and pans. I bought $2000 worth of Bessemer products after a demonstration by a saleswomen at home, so I'm covered in that department. But there's one thing missing from this picture and it happens to be the most important element: *the man.*

Despite my numerous acquisitions I am not flushed with love. I'm urged by my friends and my mum's friends to hurry up and get married. (I'm in my late twenties.) But I'm also told I shouldn't worry that the items I have bought will go to waste for it's a given that I am going to get married and have children. In the meantime, I'm single, yet I've managed to spend thousands and thousands of dollars on items that might be in storage for God knows how long. I never use any of the things I have bought now. I live at home and my mum already has all the things a house needs.

What happens to the glory garage when a girl does eventually marry? Well, it's customary for the mother of the bride to invite her friends to your soon-to-be matrimonial home a few days ahead of the wedding party to help in the unpacking of all the boxes. Some people call this project an exercise in showing off. It is. The women's cars are used to load the many boxes. Each mother has her own opinion about how to best decorate the new home. When it's my turn to move out, my mum says she'll need to hire a truck to transport all of my stuff.

Generational change, however, is starting to have an impact on jihaz as more couples opt for the wedding-gift list approach. As young modern professionals, they feel they need to be more practical about the whole process. After all, they don't want to make the same mistake their sisters, brothers and friends made and end up with five toasters. And they have become better at asking for what they really want.

But some couples who are attracted to the idea of the gift list decide against it or are pressured to ditch it because older women tend to be offended by it. These women – your mum's friends – are put off by the idea of being told what to buy and you knowing exactly how much they have spent on you.

It only hits this particular glory garage junkie that my actions are a bit premature when my teenage brother asks, 'What are you going to do with all this stuff if you *don't* get married?'

Um, well, um…good question.

'And what about all the new stuff out there? Your things will be out of fashion by the time you use them.'

That's a good question too, but it's okay, I say, because I've bought classic pieces that won't date. There.

But my brother's words do make me stop to consider if the glory garage was a good idea to begin with. I never intended to end up with so many boxes. I started off with three dinner sets, then I bought another three, then…

I suppose it does seem a bit odd making decisions about household items without the opinion of the person who will be sharing them with me. And I wonder if by purchasing them I am simply perpetuating stereotypes of a woman's role in the home. Probably.

You don't have to have a Lebanese background to be in this predicament, either, as this story is common to other communities, like the Italians and Greeks. But there does seem to be an extra dimension to it if you are Lebanese. It takes on an urgency that is perhaps not found elsewhere because there is an expectation that girls will marry young.

When I was younger, I was branded 'complicated and fussy' when I declined marriage proposals. And the women would never miss an opportunity to ask me if there was something happening in my love life. Now that I'm in my late twenties, the criticism has shifted to my parents. Some of the conversations with their friends have developed along these lines:

Parents: She wants to go to university. She's got plenty of time to get married.

Family friends: Now that she's finished university, shouldn't she start thinking about getting married?

P: She's just started a new job. It's early days yet.

FF: The problem with letting her work is she now has too much freedom and independence to think seriously about getting married.

P: Her work isn't stopping her from getting married.

FF: You haven't put enough pressure on her.

P: What's the point? When the time's right, it'll happen.

FF: She's too fussy.

P: She just knows what she's looking for.

FF: She's getting old and only men who've been married before and have children are going to want to ask about her.

God only knows.

Undercover

It's Thursday night, and the shopping centre is packed with teenagers. In the department store school girls are riffling through the clothing racks. They're all looking for the perfect dress to wear to an event they have been dreaming of for the past four years: the Year 10 formal. The girls take turns trying on the dresses and striking poses for each other in the change rooms.

I watch on and can't help thinking how lucky they are. They can take their pick of dresses: short and tight, spaghetti-strapped, sheer and strapless.

It's a different story for me.

• • •

My dad has decided to take me shopping to find a dress. It's my first shopping trip with him. Even now, more than a decade later, the experience is still vivid in my mind. I always used to shop with my mum or on my own, but this

time my mum told Dad to go with me. She had tried to explain to him how hard it was to find a dress that met his expectations, but he wasn't convinced. So my mum thought it was time he saw for himself what was on offer. Mum had given up on finding appropriate outfits at the shops a long time ago. She got her clothes made at a dressmaker.

Now I had to find a dress that met all the prerequisites my father had listed before we headed to the shops. The dress was not to reveal my arms, my chest or my legs. It wasn't even allowed to be figure-hugging. I couldn't understand what my father was thinking. All dresses were shaped. He had no idea about fashion. If he had his way he would have made me cover my hair with the headscarf. Thank God for my mum – she didn't think I was mature enough for it.

My dad's dress rules were not up for negotiation and they made it impossible for me to have any of the beautiful dresses I admired on the racks. But one of the dresses caught my eye. It was a knee-length blue halter-neck with a matching bolero. It was displayed in the window of one of the shops. I watched a shop assistant pull it off the mannequin and hand it to a girl. I looked at my dad and his eyes immediately said no. The dress was too short.

Our shopping experiment did not go well. We spent much of the time arguing. Dad found a problem with every dress I liked. They were too short, too tight or too sheer. Too… *everything*! After a few hours we gave up and I returned home empty-handed.

I already had a good idea how to make clothes because I was studying textile and design at school. With the help of one of my teachers I sat down and plotted my next move. It was going to be too hard to find something in the shops that my father liked, so I decided to make a dress. Miss Robinson gave up her lunch breaks to help me do it.

I went to my local fabric store and searched through the pattern designs for a dress I could make that my father wouldn't complain about. I still wanted my dress to be figure-hugging but it would also be ankle-length, with three-quarter sleeves and a high neckline. I settled on a design.

All my life I've worried about what I wore around my father. He was uncompromising about the fact that I shouldn't wear anything revealing. He always complained about the length of my school uniform and often said the V-neckline was too low. I had no choice but to wear my uniform down to my calves. I thought I looked silly and I felt out of place because all my friends wore it above the knee. My school uniform included a navy blazer. I had to wear it so that my arms weren't exposed. I would leave the house with it on but as soon as I was on the bus I'd take it off.

When I turned fifteen my father laid down new ground rules. Anything below my collarbone was too much chest and I was not to wear short-sleeved tops anymore. Anything above my biceps was not allowed. If he caught me in something he didn't like, he would yell: 'Is that how you're going out?' If he was especially unhappy with one of my outfits he would badger my mum to tell

me to change into something more appropriate. 'You can see her chest,' I'd overhear him complaining to her.

To avoid confrontation I mastered the art of sneaking out of the house. The few times I got caught he ordered me back to my room to put a jacket on. Sometimes I didn't have the energy to fight with him about it.

As a traditionalist, my father believed that girls should dress modestly. He wanted me to look to my mum as a fashion role-model. She covered her hair with headscarves, wore skirts that swept the floor and concealed her arms with a long-sleeved shirt or suit jacket. I didn't think there was anything wrong with my mum's clothes, but I didn't think there was anything wrong with mine either. Besides, I was a teenager and she was married with children.

To avoid arguments I started wearing a jacket or cardigan on top of my other clothes whenever I left the house. But as soon as I was out of sight I would take off that extra layer. Sometimes I left the house with two outfits: one that would pass the strict father-clothes test, the other the replacement I would change into when I got to my destination.

Even when I was in my early twenties and I could drive and vote, I was still being told what not to wear. I was torn. I was too modest for my friends and not modest enough for my dad.

The thing that frustrated me the most was that I wasn't even into revealing clothes anyway. I hated mini-skirts and my wardrobe was pretty restrained. In fact, I'd never worn a mini-skirt or paraded in a bikini at the beach. My wardrobe was overflowing with three-quarter

sleeve tops, plain shirts and pants that didn't hug my bum or thighs too tightly. My father was against any piece of clothing that revealed the shape of my body. In my late teens I got so paranoid about my clothes that I began wearing my brothers' oversized shirts.

Now that I'm getting older and learning more about Islam I have developed a better understanding of why my father was so tough on me when I was growing up. Islam places a strong emphasis on women dressing modestly. For example, women should not reveal cleavage because it can attract unwanted attention. When my father used to tell me off about my clothes, he never explained why he thought I shouldn't be wearing them.

These days I love big-name designers like Collette Dinnigan, Lisa Ho and Charlie Brown. But in the warmer months it's practically impossible to find something in their collections to wear. The closest I get to wearing their outfits is when I try them on in a change room. That's where the experience ends. If I do buy their garments, I buy them knowing that I'm going to have to make alterations. This might mean sewing on sleeves, taking down hemlines or adding lining. My dressmaker has made a lot of money out of me. But making alterations drove me crazy because often the changes meant that the look I loved in the dressing room was dramatically altered.

So I have decided to stop buying clothes that need adjustment. Some of my friends get excited about wearing short skirts, sleeveless dresses and singlets in summer but I dread the warmer weather because it means it will be hard

to find something to wear that doesn't expose my body. I laugh when I find something to wear and the shop assistant asks if there is a special reason for buying it. There doesn't have to be a special occasion for me to shop. When I find a formal dress or outfit that has sleeves I scoop it up because I know a time will come when I will need it.

I love winter for its clothes. I can wear thick woollen jumpers and suits and I don't have to worry about finding something that's going to keep me cool.

There isn't much variety in my wardrobe, but even my pants, jackets, ankle-length skirts and three-quarter sleeve tops would not be considered conservative enough for some in the Muslim community.

One of the biggest frustrations Muslim women in Australia face is finding clothes to wear that reflect their religious values. But times are changing. With a growing Muslim population, it was inevitable that an entrepreneurial person would come up with a solution. Three sisters – Janet, Kate and Iman – banded together to set up a clothing business that catered for Muslim women. Their shop is called 'Undercover – Modest Clothing for Modest Women'. It is located in Bankstown in Sydney's south-west, an area with a high Muslim population.

When Iman converted to Islam and started wearing the headscarf, she discovered how hard it was to find the right clothes to wear. 'Before becoming a Muslim,' she said, 'I used to dress in singlets and shorts and I never had any trouble finding something to wear at any of the department stores.'

When Iman and her sisters visited stores that promoted themselves as places to shop for Muslim clothing, they found only traditional dresses such as *abayas* and *jilbabs*. The stores catered for women who followed one strict way of dressing: ankle-length, dark-coloured coat-style outfits.

'It wasn't what I wanted and the fabrics didn't suit the climate,' said Iman. She didn't believe that wearing the *hijab* (headscarf) meant that she should stop wearing modern and stylish clothes. Her sister Janet doesn't wear the headscarf but she still wanted to dress discreetly. 'We found it difficult to shop at Islamic clothing stores,' said Janet. 'They didn't meet our needs and a lot of the clothes didn't suit our age group.'

Now customers come from all over Australia to shop at their store. 'We have people who are from a Christian church congregation who also find it hard to get the right clothes,' said Iman. The sisters don't want to exclude other members of the buying public, so the words Islam or Muslim do not feature in the shop's name or advertising. Anyone can shop at Undercover.

Many customers are young Muslim girls who are interested in fashion but know there are restrictions on what they can wear. 'Undercover' provides an alternative shopping experience. On offer is an array of pants, long skirts, business shirts and loose tops, and also traditional Islamic clothing and Indian saris. But the best thing about it is that the clothes are available all year round.

Note: Undercover *is now under new management.*

Keeping It in the Family

When Australian-raised actress Greta Scacchi married her first cousin in the 1990s, it was reported as if it were a scandal. But the shock reaction to the marriage was actually a surprise to other people. For some communities marriage between first cousins is common. For example, the Lebanese Muslim community does not consider such a relationship taboo. In fact, it encourages it. So much so that it would be hard to find a girl who hasn't received a marriage proposal from a first cousin, from either her mother's or father's family. Usually, the man lives in Lebanon – her parents' native country – where many of her relatives still reside. In Australia, the young Lebanese Muslims call such a man 'the Import'. If a Lebanese man marries an Australian girl visiting Lebanon, he can get a visa and move to Australia.

Fatima's story: Fatima was eighteen when her father first suggested that she marry one of her first cousins in Lebanon. 'We were really close, my dad and me, and he said he wanted the perfect man for me,' she recalled.

Her father's idea of 'perfect' was someone within the family.

'He should be my cousin,' Fatima said her father advised her, 'because being my cousin, he would be someone my dad could easily trust had been brought up the right way. My dad honestly believed that he had picked the best person for me. Even though his sister lived half a world away, he knew she had brought her son up to be honest and hard-working. Dad could trust he was a good Muslim.'

At the same time as Fatima's father was discussing her future, her grandmother was beginning to tell her good things about the cousin. His name was Jalal. Fatima's grandmother had been granted Australian citizenship but still visited Lebanon regularly, so she had spent a lot of time with Jalal.

Many people wouldn't consider the idea of marrying a cousin, let alone the closest one of all – an aunty or uncle's son. But the fact that Jalal *was* Fatima's first cousin was the reason her father wanted her to marry him.

'It was important,' Fatima explained, 'because he thought that was the best way to keep a close eye on me. It also meant that if Jalal was my husband, he would also be aware that my father was keeping an eye on him and how he was treating me.'

Some people believe this is the mark of a good father looking out for his daughter; others see it is an extreme form of parental control. Fatima's father believed marriage between first cousins offered more security than a relationship with a man outside the family. For some Lebanese parents, even a son or daughter's marriage to a person outside their native village is considered a problem!

When Fatima was twenty she was to go on a trip to Lebanon. To sweeten the idea of marriage, the trip was meant to be a holiday, a time to unwind and get to know Jalal.

The deal was: if Fatima liked Jalal, then they could get engaged. If she didn't, then she could come back home having benefited from a break overseas.

Fatima's parents decided she should travel to Lebanon on her own because they were busy with work. She was to stay with her grandmother and be cared for by trusted relatives.

In the beginning, Fatima didn't feel pressured to consider Jalal a potential husband. 'My dad told me to do whatever felt comfortable,' she said.

However, once she was in Lebanon, Fatima began to feel the full weight of her extended family's wish for her to agree to a relationship with Jalal.

During the first two weeks, Jalal visited her at her grandmother's (she was also *his* grandmother) once or twice a week, but as her departure date drew closer he came more often. 'It wasn't love at first sight,' Fatima insisted. 'I felt comfortable with him and thought he was

someone I'd like to get to know. I could tell he liked me.'

Jalal and Fatima spent time together, visiting the tourist sites and going for long walks. Jalal couldn't speak English, but Fatima's Arabic was good.

One morning, with just two weeks to go before she had to leave, Fatima was taken aside by her aunty, Jalal's mother. 'All right,' she said. 'You've been here for five weeks. Do you want my son or not?'

Although Fatima was aware of her father's motives for sending her to Lebanon, she was still surprised. 'That's when the pressure was really on,' she said. 'I wasn't ready to make a decision, but my aunty was being realistic. I wasn't going to be in Lebanon for much longer and the family wanted to know which way I was leaning. I had to make a decision because I wasn't going to be able to go back home to Australia and ask to be sent back to Lebanon for more time to get to know him. My dad had already forked out thousands of dollars on my plane ticket and spending money. He hadn't done that for nothing.'

Fatima told her aunty that in the short time she had been in Lebanon she had grown to like Jalal and that she would accept an engagement proposal.

Her aunty rushed off to tell her son the good news, and immediately life took on a sense of urgency. Fatima had to spend her last days in Lebanon finding a dress to wear, choosing an engagement ring and other jewellery and making a trip to the Australian Embassy in Beirut to fill out a visa application for a prospective spouse. Jalal helped to organise the engagement party.

But Fatima couldn't shake the feeling that she wasn't ready for an engagement. 'At that point so much was happening that I just told myself to take it as it comes,' she said. 'Somewhere in the back of my mind I thought that I could still put an end to it. I felt like I was the one in the stronger position because I was the one with Australian citizenship, the one who had to sign off on official paperwork for him to come to Australia. I was the one who could speak English. The reason I said yes was because I felt comfortable with Jalal and all the people around me – the people I loved, my family – were telling me he was a good person to marry. It was my trust in them that made me go through with the engagement. When Jalal and I said goodbye at Beirut Airport, I thought I would miss him, but at the same time I knew that going back to my normal life would give me some breathing space and time to clear my mind.'

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It was certainly a different reality when Fatima's plane landed on Australian soil.

'I know this sounds awful, but when you go on a holiday you end up buying things that you would never normally buy if you saw them in the shops in Sydney. Well…that's how I felt about Jalal. When I got back home I felt I had made the wrong decision. I knew he was a good person but I didn't feel emotionally attached to him in the way you should. My dad knew very early on that I wasn't feeling comfortable with my decision.'

But the last thing her father was expecting was for Fatima to change her mind.

'It was a big shock to him. He kept shaking his head and saying how he had told me to take my time, to make my own decision and to not do anything until I was sure about it. He said, "You promised yourself to Jalal and there's no way you are going to bring shame on this family. There'll be no turning back. It will be Jalal who you marry or no one!"

'I felt like he cared more about Jalal and my aunty's feelings than mine,' Fatima said. 'He used the saying that a woman is like a piece of glass: once scratched, it's never the same again.' The implication is that once a woman's name is linked to a man's, her chances of finding another man as good as the first are greatly reduced.

Although Fatima and Jalal were yet to be married, they were already considered a couple and breaking off the engagement was like being divorced.

The divorce rate in the Australian Lebanese Muslim community is low, but the figures do not tell the full story because some women, as in other communities, stay in unhappy or violent marriages for their children's sake, so that they don't tarnish their family's reputation.

Fatima agonised over her engagement. How could she have promised to spend the rest of her life with someone she hardly knew? She found little comfort in the knowledge that some of her friends had only had a short courtship before their marriages to men from Lebanon. One aunty told Fatima she was lucky

to have had the chance to spend some time getting to know Jalal. She knew women who had married men based on a picture, or their parents had chosen for them and had just hoped for the best. One woman only met her husband a few days before her wedding, and others were promised to a relative's son from the time they were born.

Fatima decided to call Jalal. 'I was honest with him,' she said. 'When I told him I was having second thoughts, there was a long silence. I felt bad. When he finally spoke his voice was cracking. He kept saying he didn't understand what had changed, what had gone wrong.'

Fatima didn't want to hurt Jalal, but she couldn't stay engaged just to keep him and her family happy. Being unsure about her feelings for Jalal was not a good enough reason for breaking off the engagement. Jalal was a good-looking, honest and hard-working man. 'What more could a girl want?' her family asked.

Fatima tried to find a way out, without hurting the people closest to her. She tried to talk to her father again, but he wouldn't listen. So Fatima told Jalal that if he still wanted to travel to Australia then she would not stand in the way of his obtaining a visa and would see to it that his immigration documents were processed as planned even though they were no longer together. Fatima understood this would mean lying to the immigration officer handling their application by pretending she was still engaged to Jalal, but it meant that Jalal could still travel to Australia, as her father wished.

Then Fatima began to regret her proposal. 'I realised that if he was given the green light to travel here then the pressure to continue with the engagement would be greater. Everyone would assume that we were still together and treat us as a couple.'

Fatima had a complicated relationship with her mother, even before she went to Lebanon. Her mother was opposed to the engagement from the beginning, and even though Fatima had changed her mind, her mother refused to get involved.

Her father said, 'Think of your family. We're not like other people. No one in our family breaks off an engagement. You think this is like television, where people get someone new every day?'

Frightened but determined, Fatima wanted to take control of her life. She picked up the phone and called the number for the Department of Immigration. She asked what she had to do if she changed her mind about supporting a visa application. A man informed her that if she wanted to abort the process then she would have to put it in writing.

Her letter was short and to the point.

To whom it may concern,

I, Fatima Abed, no longer want to proceed with the application for a prospective spouse visa because I do not want to go through with a marriage.

I am under a lot of family pressure to proceed but it is not what I want.

I hereby withdraw my application.
Yours faithfully,
Fatima Abed

It did not take long for Jalal to hear that his visa had been rejected. Fatima's father first heard of the department's assessment after a frantic phone call from Lebanon. He was furious. He demanded to know what had gone wrong with Jalal's visa.

Fatima was afraid of her father's reaction if he knew the truth and she wouldn't confess to what she'd done. Her father was suspicious.

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Fatima hoped that now Jalal wasn't coming to Australia she would be left alone to work out her feelings. 'Everyone was upset with me,' she said. 'My dad, Jalal… and to be honest I wasn't feeling so good about what I had done. It wasn't a case of definitely not wanting to be with Jalal, just that I wasn't being given the time and space to be completely sure about it.'

Meanwhile, Jalal thought there might be another reason why Fatima had changed her mind. He knew men who were desperate to leave Lebanon who had established relationships with girls visiting from Australia. Once they were in Australia and had secured a visa they would end the relationship. He wanted to prove to Fatima that his feelings for her were genuine. So he suggested she be the one to move overseas, where they could marry and live in Lebanon. 'It put my mind at ease a bit but my problems

with Jalal were never about him wanting me for the visa,' Fatima said. 'I just wasn't sure how much I liked him.'

After Fatima turned down Jalal's offer, all contact between them ended – phone calls, letters and messages passed through relatives. Her life returned to her old routine and her father stopped discussing the issue with her altogether.

'Dad was still upset with me but I think he finally realised that pushing me was only making things worse. And anyway, he wasn't keen on the idea of me living overseas.'

A few months later Fatima's grandmother returned from a visit to Lebanon, bringing some surprise gifts from Jalal. When he phoned to ask if she liked his presents, Fatima was delighted to hear from him.

'That break from each other had given me time to really think about what I wanted,' Fatima says. 'I laughed when my grandmother gave me the presents because I thought Jalal was trying to worm his way back into my life.' It worked. 'We spoke for a short time and he asked if he could call me again. I said yes. I liked talking to him.'

From then on Jalal called her at least once a week. He earned little from his work at a fruit market and Fatima felt guilty that most of his pay was going on international calls to her.

During one phone call, Jalal asked Fatima if she still had feelings for him. 'He told me he still loved me and wanted us to be together,' Fatima said. 'Since he'd started calling me again I realised how much I liked him, and I told him that he should come to Australia.'

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Sitting in a small office before an immigration officer, Fatima explained that she regretted her earlier actions and wanted to reinstate Jalal's visa application. 'I told the officer that we had kissed and made up and that it was all a big mistake. I tried to reassure him that I wasn't doing it because of family pressure.' The meeting was a success. 'I think he was pretty savvy about the situation because he had managed a lot of cases where Lebanese girls would go through with the process just to please their parents,' she said.

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As Fatima waited nervously with her family at Sydney airport for Jalal's plane to land, she remembered how one girl she knew had taken a more complicated journey when a first cousin was coming to Australia.

This girl and her Lebanese fiancé travelled from her parents' village to Beirut airport in the back seat of a local politician's car. Their families were related to the politician and had struck a deal with him to use his car to drive to the airport so they could avoid stopping at checkpoints along the highway. At the checkpoints, all cars with the Member of Parliament number plate pulled into the lane reserved for VIPs and were waved through. If this girl and her fiancé had travelled in a civilian car, then he might have been asked to hand over identification documents. If the military police ran a check on him, they would have discovered that he hadn't done a year of compulsory military service, and he would have been taken away for questioning.

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At Sydney airport, Jalal made his way to Fatima. 'We hugged and it felt good,' Fatima said. 'A lot of other family members were there and the fact that he came to me first was really important.'

Jalal was to live with Fatima's family until they got married. When Fatima returned to work after helping Jalal settle in, she announced to her workmates that she was getting married. They had a lot of questions, the trickiest being if it was a crime for her to marry her first cousin. 'A lot of people are surprised when I tell them that he's my first cousin – and that it's not illegal for us to be together.'

Fatima grew up in Sydney surrounded by other male first cousins but she always treated them like brothers. It was a different experience with Jalal because there was no shared history. 'He grew up in another world and was practically a stranger when we met.'

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In Australia, a person is free to marry their first cousin. Australian Lebanese Muslim girls who marry first cousins tend to do so with a person they have not grown up with and who migrates to Australia. They are expected to have a blood test; however, it is not a legal requirement.

Embracing the Hijab

Ahlam was watching television in her room when there was a knock at the door. She opened it to find her mother, Alia, standing before her with tears streaming down her face.

So many bad scenarios raced through Ahlam's mind. Was she busted for jigging class? Had someone dobbed her in for going to the school disco? Did her mum find the packet of cigarettes she'd stashed in her underwear drawer? But nothing could prepare her for what her mother said.

'*Habibti, eejana telefon, rafee'tek Layla…kanet bi-hadeth*,' her mother told her in Arabic.

'What?' Ahlam screamed in shock. She could see her mother's lips moving but was deaf to the words. Eventually, she heard the word *hadeth*.

'What do you mean, Layla was in an accident?' Ahlam said.

'She was in a car with a boy…and she died,' her mother whispered.

Ahlam slumped onto her bed and stayed there for the rest of the day. The news of her best friend's death didn't seem real to her. She stared at the ceiling, replaying over in her mind the happy times she had shared with Layla. Layla was tall and had long dark hair. Ahlam thought she was very pretty and the boys thought so too. But Layla was only interested in Michael. And only Ahlam knew that Michael had proposed to Layla, but he wasn't Muslim.

Ahlam remembered the time she and Layla had jigged school to go to the movies. They loved Keanu Reeves and were desperate to see his new film. They also both hated sport and each year they would miss the school swimming and athletics carnivals and escape to the theme park, Australia's Wonderland. Now Layla had died, in an accident with the boyfriend her parents knew nothing about. This was going to bring shame on Layla's family.

Layla's funeral was held a couple of days after her death. Muslims believe it is important to bury the dead as soon as possible, out of respect for the deceased.

Ahlam attended the memorial service, which was held on the third day of mourning, but she didn't attend the funeral, where only the immediate family and men of the community were present.

The memorial service was held at Layla's home. Ahlam sat inside with her mother and the other women while the men sat outside with the sheikh. They recited verses

from the Koran and every hour or so the guests were offered dates in memory of Layla.

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It took Ahlam many months to come to terms with her friend's death and to accept her mum's advice to move on with her life. She missed her nightly gossip sessions on the phone with Layla. School was now a lonely place and at home Ahlam spent most of her time in her bedroom.

Layla's sudden death changed Ahlam forever. It forced her to re-evaluate her life. She began to question the purpose of life. While Ahlam knew that death was inevitable, she had always thought she was too young to die; now she realised that death knew no age.

Ahlam also had flashbacks to the times she had shunned her religion. One of her most vivid childhood memories was of her Arabic school teacher lecturing her about Islamic values and how they could help to bring inner peace.

Ahlam had grown up with two devout Muslim parents. They prayed five times a day, gave *sadaqa* (charity, in Arabic) to the less privileged and observed Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting. Ahlam's mother wore the hijab, the traditional head-covering many Muslim women wear for modesty.

From the time Ahlam was in primary school, her parents sent her to Arabic school for language and scripture classes twice a week. Her brothers and sisters got the same treatment. Their parents wanted them all to learn to read and write Arabic and understand the Koran, the

holy book. But Ahlam spent most of her time in class daydreaming about hanging out with her real school friends. She thought anything would be better than wog school.

For Arabic school, Ahlam was required to wear the hijab. But if she'd had her way she would never have put that ridiculous looking rag on her head. Not for a minute. She refused to wear it on her way to Arabic school, but as soon as she entered the playground it had to be on or else she would be locked out of class.

One afternoon Ahlam left home late for one of her classes. In her hurry she forgot the hijab and was already halfway to school before she realised it wasn't in her backpack. She arrived half an hour late for class and her *istaz* (teacher, in Arabic) was angry.

When Ahlam first started Arabic school she had been terrified of her istaz. After spending a few years in his classes, however, she had become used to his scare tactics. But this time she faced a lecture, ten smacks across the hand with a ruler and being put out of class.

'Where is your hijab?' asked Istaz Ali. He believed all girls should wear the hijab once they became teenagers, and Ahlam was now fifteen. Still trying to catch her breath after rushing to class, Ahlam told him she had left it at home.

Istaz Ali thought Ahlam was one of his brightest students and couldn't understand why she continually rebelled in his class. 'There's no excuse for coming to class without the hijab,' he told her. 'There will be no lesson for you today.'

No ruler, Ahlam thought, relieved she had escaped physical punishment. She took a seat at one of the tables outside the classroom and opened the Koran. Istaz Ali always left the door slightly ajar so that those students who misbehaved were still able to hear the lesson from outside. Then, when the rest of her classmates were enjoying a short break, Ahlam was forced to go back inside to continue her studies.

Ahlam had spent many hours pleading with her parents to pull her out of Arabic school. She told them she hated learning Arabic and couldn't understand why she had to learn about Islam. If there was one good thing to come out of the experience, though, it was that her grades pleased her parents. They would often ask her to show their friends the *jayed jiddan* (very good, in Arabic) scribbled across her work.

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Before Layla's death, Islam had not been meaningful in Ahlam's life. She thought that as long as she was good to her family she'd done enough. She refused to pray with them and broke her fast at school during Ramadan while pretending otherwise when she got home. But Layla's death had shaken her. How could someone who had her whole life to live just not be alive anymore? She'd thought about the lies she and Layla had told their parents and about having boyfriends and smoking behind her parents' back. Ahlam stored all her male friends' phone numbers under girls' names. And for as long as she could remember, Ahlam had been lectured about the dangers of getting into

a car with a man other than her father, brother or uncle. This wasn't about stranger danger. Ahlam had been warned that if she were seen with a man who wasn't a family member, people would assume she had a boyfriend. This would ruin her life and bring shame on the whole family.

Now Ahlam thought about Judgement Day, when she would have to account for her actions before Allah (or God). For the first time she was beginning to understand what her parents meant when they had warned her to fear God.

Ahlam didn't think it was too late to make up for past mistakes and she decided to learn more about Islam. She found a school in Lakemba, in the heart of Sydney's Islamic community, where she began religion classes. This time she was learning about Islam on her own terms. The class was women-only and some of the students had converted to Islam, but many were like her – Muslim women who wanted to know more about their faith.

Ahlam learned about new aspects of Islam and she found comfort in it, particularly that Allah forgave those who asked for forgiveness. She began to think that perhaps she could make up for all of the bad things she had done.

Ahlam began to pray five times a day – one of the five pillars of Islam – and asked her school principal if she could use a vacant classroom for midday prayers. After some lobbying she got her prayer room, where she was joined by a group of other Muslim girls.

Ahlam became a different person at school. She no longer skipped class, and she took her studies seriously.

Her life at home also changed. She stopped fighting with her mother about her chores and even offered to help in the kitchen. Now she helped roll vine leaves and stuff zucchinis with rice and mincemeat. Once, she had punched holes in so many of the zucchinis that her mother asked her to stop before she ruined the dish.

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Six months had passed since Layla's death and Ahlam's life had changed considerably. Now another issue was weighing on her mind. Ahlam was seriously considering wearing the hijab full time, not just during prayers.

Her taste in clothes had undergone a dramatic change. She no longer rolled up her school skirt during morning assembly. Instead, it remained the same length between home and school and sat permanently below her calves. She began to wear dark stockings to cover her bare legs, chucked out her midriff tops and replaced them with loose-fitting shirts. Her wardrobe was now full of long, flowing skirts instead of the body-hugging jeans that were once a must-have fashion accessory.

Ahlam believed the next natural step was to wear the hijab whenever she was out in public. Muslim women are not required to wear the hijab when they are indoors in the company of immediate family and female friends.

While Ahlam had grown proud of her religion, she knew she might face some prejudice in the wider community, especially when she was old enough to go to work. But she also knew that more women were wearing the hijab without any problems. Still, Ahlam was advised

by her family to take her time before making a final decision. Her sisters warned that once the hijab was on, it was haram to take it off. Presentation and behaviour in public were of utmost importance, too.

'As a Muslim woman wearing the hijab,' said her sister Nadine, 'it's even more important to do the right thing. Once you wear it, you are instantly recognised as a Muslim, so you can't have a boyfriend and wear tight jeans. You must respect what the hijab represents to the thousands of women who wear it because your actions will reflect on all of them.'

Ahlam agreed not to rush things. She began to make new friends in her Islamic class. The women there seemed to understand her dilemma as they had wrestled with it themselves.

One of her new friends was Rouba, who was a few years older and a high school teacher. She was the first person Ahlam trusted enough to talk to about Layla's death. More than anything, Ahlam appreciated Rouba's advice.

'Whatever we face, it's Allah's plan,' Rouba said. 'But it's how you deal with it that makes you different.' Rouba had met other girls like Ahlam who had turned to their religion after experiencing tragedy. 'You could feel sorry for yourself, but you've chosen to put your energy into something positive,' she said. 'God forgives.'

Rouba explained how she had come back to Islam after finishing university. She said she used to be a wild one, dating boys and partying. She would often tell her

parents that she was studying late at a friend's house when she was really at a nightclub. Rouba's parents would only let her go out when it had something to do with school or work, but she knew her parents had no idea about university schedules. So she told them she had to be at uni five days a week and that she also had night classes, which doubled as her partying hours.

Rouba's stories made Ahlam think of Layla and all the risks they had taken together. Maybe that was why Ahlam found it so easy to talk to Rouba; there was so much of Layla in her.

The hijab was the main topic of study at Ahlam's next Islamic class. The women were discussing whether Muslim women in western society should wear it. Although most Islamic scholars hold the view that the hijab is compulsory after puberty, there is debate about whether the Koran specifies a head covering. A *hadith* (writings about the Prophet Muhammad's life) says the Prophet indicated that after puberty nothing should be seen of a woman but her hands and face. However, there is a highly controversial modernist view that such hadith should be taken in the context of the time and place in which it was said and that it should not apply in the 21st century.

Ahlam was the only one present who didn't wear the hijab. She knew girls who didn't put it on because they weren't ready for the spiritual and practical commitments that come with wearing it. For example, they liked their hair too much to cover it up and they weren't prepared to give up tight clothes or to stop pumping the music in

their cars. For Muslim women who do wear the hijab, these are just superficial excuses. Ahlam listened closely as the women around her spoke.

'It can be difficult to live in Australia and wear the hijab,' one woman warned. 'Sometimes, I get harassed in the street and on the trains. People call it a tea-towel and a sheet.'

Another woman said she was once spat on. 'Now I feel nervous about leaving home whenever there are negative stories about Muslims in the media.'

Ahlam was saddened that there were people who feared Islam and were suspicious of Muslims. She turned to Rouba. 'What would you say to someone like me?' she asked. 'I'm thinking about wearing the hijab and now I'm hearing these scary stories. I don't feel so sure about taking this step.'

'I know these stories are scary,' said Rouba. 'Remember that it's about you being true to Allah, no one else. Dealing with these challenges and pressures will only make you stronger. I'd defend any woman who wants to wear the hijab, just as I'd defend any woman who doesn't want to wear it. It's an expression of devotion to the faith that no one can force. It has to be something that you want to do.'

Ahlam wanted to keep learning about her religion but didn't feel ready to wear the hijab. She knew that one day she would take that step.

That day came a few years after Layla's death. This time no one was forcing her to do something she didn't want. After all, she wasn't in primary school anymore.

Divorcing the Community

Lebanese people frustrate me in a way that I can't even begin to tell you. Arggggh…the hypocrisy!

My brother, Fadi, thinks people who go to university or socialise with non-Lebs are fakes. I guess he thinks like that because he feels that I'm not being true to my heritage. He says people who go to uni are a bunch of idiots who can't handle themselves in the real world. That's the world where guys get into punch-ups because someone looks at them the wrong way, and they go for Anthony Mundine, the boxer, just because he's a Muslim. Never mind his politics or anything like that.

My brother epitomises what I dislike about Lebanese people. He doesn't understand Islam but he never misses a chance to lecture me about how a girl (mum, sister, wife) should do everything for him, from making him breakfast to making his bed. He can be racist. Being born with a

penis means he can go to nightclubs without being punished by my dad, and he can have sex, as long as he doesn't advertise it. He can pretty much do whatever he wants whenever he wants, without facing the same consequences as me.

The other day two men knocked on our door, Jehovah's Witness-style, except that they were preaching the word of Allah. They specifically asked to speak with the man of the house. Don't they know girls have brains? Dad wasn't around so Fadi sat with them outside and when I went out to ask him who these people were, he said: 'Salma, these people are going to heaven and you are going to hell.' This from a guy who's never even read the Koran!

When I was growing up I never felt close to the Lebanese community. I wanted to be different from the other Lebanese girls at school. I didn't like the Lebanese things they liked – engagement parties, baby talk, Arabic music and belly-dancing. It just wasn't me. But in a weird sort of way they respected me for wanting an education. It made me happy they thought I was smart.

Instead of hanging out with them, I turned to the sportsground. Sport was something they literally ran away from. They felt uncomfortable in a sports uniform, and couldn't understand the enjoyment of scoring a soccer goal. I loved the accolades I got from my sporting triumphs. Playing sport got me out of talks about marriage and babies.

My teachers helped me appreciate things about Anglo-Australian culture. I had this amazing English

teacher who took us to the theatre in the city. High school was the first time I'd experienced something like that. I know girls in their twenties who've never been to the theatre.

I thought if I wanted to have more of that intellectual world I'd have to reject the Lebanese part of me. In the Lebanese world there were no plays, no sport and no travelling. There was a lot we just didn't do because we were Lebs.

Deep down I knew that embracing the Lebanese part of me would also mean taking on the other part – being a Muslim. When I was a teenager I thought I would miss out on so much, I tried to ignore it.

If you weren't continuing your studies then your mum's friends would ask, 'What are you waiting for? Why aren't you married yet?' But for some reason if you went to university then it was fine to let you be on your own for a while longer.

Going to university meant that I could put off getting married, especially getting hooked up with someone on their terms. By that I mean to a Lebanese Muslim man.

Back then, I really felt sorry for the Lebanese girls at my school. They had no idea what they were missing. I felt better than them because I had experienced more of life. I had been to places they had never been. It's taken me a while to realise I'm not better than them, I'm just someone with different aspirations.

When I was growing up I didn't know a single Jewish person. Once, a school excursion to the Jewish Museum

was cancelled because the parents refused to let their daughters go. I was so angry. I was really looking forward to the trip because I was intrigued by something new to me. Some of the girls said, 'Why should we go after what they've done to us?'

Today, some of my closest friends are Jewish. Muslims have judged me more about my religion than non-Muslims. I didn't fast during the holy month of Ramadan and that absolutely shocked the other Muslim girls. They said, 'What sort of family is that, that doesn't make you fast?'

Uni gave me a sense of freedom. Nobody knew what school I went to and I avoided talking about my background. Everybody was pretty much from the eastern and northern suburbs. I made a conscious decision to not sound different from them. I tried so hard not to sound like a Bankstown girl. I made sure my English was perfect and even now people say, 'You don't sound Lebanese.' I take it as a compliment because I think they mean my English is excellent.

I did think about the university's Lebanese Society. I thought about staying as far away from it as possible! There were times when my uni friends would ask me about my cultural heritage and I'd snap back that I was Australian. Then they'd follow up with Australian of what? Australian of Lebanese descent – that's how I put it. I found that question patronising and even now I'm still not 100 per cent comfortable with it. Why do they ask? When I'm describing someone I never say she's an Aussie; I say she's

Anglo. I'm very pedantic about that. They're Australian, I'm Australian, we're all Australian. When I travel and I say that I'm Australian, people accept that. Why can't they do that here?

I remember one time at uni when I was hanging out at the Italian stall during orientation week with one of my friends, Angelo, and the guys in the Lebanese stall asked me to join them. I told them I wasn't Lebanese. Even Angelo couldn't understand why I wanted to hide it. Even now I would have no interest in joining a Lebanese or Muslim society, although I've become more accepting of Muslim life.

Every year at uni this guy would organise an end of year party. He'd hire a hotel and we'd show up dressed in theme. One year I went as a police officer, the year before I was Miss Porn Mexico, and before that (it was a bit rude of me but hey, we were young) a group of us went wrapped in Glad Wrap with only our bikinis underneath. When I went outside I held on to my black leather jacket so tightly, thinking, if my parents see this they'll have a heart attack. We ruled the place we were so hot! Even now people still say that the Glad Wrap girls were the best.

There was no chance of bumping into my brother at these events. You'd find him at Rogues Nightclub, the place to be if you're a Lebanese guy from the Bankstown and Granville areas. That wasn't my scene. I was into the upmarket bars. I'd go with my friends to Establishment, Slip-Inn and boutique nightclubs in Paddington.

Now people think that because I'm twenty-five and

love my work that I'm not interested in marriage. But I think marriage is beautiful. I don't enter relationships unless I feel love and believe that the relationship can be meaningful and possibly lead to marriage. I just didn't want to get married as a teenager, and I wanted to meet the guy on my own terms. Of course that was hard when 'Muslim' had to be part of the criteria for a man. Muslim featured on my list only because I thought it would make things easier for my family. I always thought that as I got older and more courageous I would eventually drop that requirement.

My parents know I'm seeing Mehmet, but they hide it from everyone. Mehmet's Turkish and a Muslim. Yes, I ended up with a Muslim! But he's not allowed to visit my place until we're officially engaged because my parents are worried about what people will think and say. They could be honest about it if they wanted to. I mean, they let me go overseas on my own – a first among all the Lebanese girls I know – and I'm still the same girl. Nothing bad happened to me. I wasn't raped, I didn't rebel against the family when I got back and I'm still the reliable daughter who takes her grandparents to the Department of Housing to fill out forms.

When I get married and I'm allowed to move out of home, I want to live somewhere where there is a mix of cultures. I don't want to give up the kebab shops in Auburn or the Lebanese grocery stores in Greenacre, but at the same time I want to spend my Sundays reading the paper and doing the Bronte to Bondi walk. Who do you know that's Lebanese that does that walk? Most Lebanese

Muslims stick with their way of life. It's too much effort for them to have both. Very few people would completely give up the Lebanese culture.

It's taken me a while but I've come to realise there are some positives about the Lebanese culture. I'm shocked that some people only see their grandparents once a year, or that their mother has to ring before she comes to visit. I'm a big fan of just popping in. It's the way Lebanese people are brought up. I only began to appreciate the Lebanese sense of community by getting away from it and seeing the way other people live.

Some of my relatives and family friends told my mum that she was crazy to let me go overseas, but now she actually boasts about me backpacking through Europe. And my grandfather, the patriarch of the family, was proud of me too. I know he trusts me and has faith in my decisions.

I think one of my aunties is still in shock that my family was so liberal about it. She tells my mum off and says that instead of boasting about my travel adventures she should be keeping quiet. She says a good Muslim girl doesn't travel on her own, although she'll never actually use my name when she makes that statement. That would be too offensive. I know she wouldn't feel so strongly about it if I were a boy.

My father didn't approve when I first raised the idea of travel. I ended up writing him a letter asking for his support for my trip. Arabs seem to have an aversion to backpacking. They say that if they can't afford to stay in

good hotels then they'd rather stay home. Anyway, here's a taste of my letter.

To my loving father,
I am asking for your blessing and permission to travel and see the world.

I have tried to explain to you that no matter where I will be in the world, I will always be your daughter. Now I need you to trust that you have done all that you can to make a good human being, a person who knows between right and wrong. I have thought about all the possible reasons that you may have against the idea of me going overseas for three months.

Please don't care about what people say. People will accept that you have allowed your daughter to travel the world. If you allow me to travel, it will not make you a lesser Muslim. Our religion does not say that women cannot travel on their own. You and Mum say that our religion is the most versatile and accepting. Prove to me that this is the case.

I am pleading for your support. I ask you to not deny me my dreams.

Much Love

Salma

P.S. I need you to agree soon because I need to buy my ticket. All the other girls have already bought their tickets.

Most of the Lebanese parents I know don't want to challenge the status quo. It's as though they're always living their lives for other people, worrying about gossip and what others will think of them. It's no way to live.

For a long time I didn't want to say I was a Muslim. Believe it or not, it's through my friendships with Jewish and Christian people that I was inspired to learn more about Islam. I realised that I shouldn't judge Islam on the way some people practise it. And I guess I just started thinking…this is who I am.

I have to admit though that I don't like the regimen of it – if you don't pray five times a day then you're not considered a good Muslim. But I pray all the time. Maybe I don't do it the formal way, but I pray, and not just when I want something from God. I don't steal, I give to charity and I always try to help others. To me that makes a good Muslim. And the headscarf? I have major problems with it. What makes anyone more Muslim because they wear it? I think it's cultural. I'm just not convinced it's a religious requirement.

I'm trying to be a little more sympathetic towards Lebanese boys. Maybe my brother's a different person with other people. Sometimes I catch glimpses of a stylish young man and it makes me smile. He's mean because brothers are like that, but also because I don't fit the mould of what he thinks a Lebanese girl should be. I'm not sure how he defines the perfect Lebanese Muslim woman; he's single. I guess his anger towards me and how I live my life are part of the battle he faces as a Lebanese Muslim. I appreciate Anglo-Australian culture; he doesn't. I accept Australian rules and the bureaucracy, and I don't feel I need to scam the system. But I've got my own quiet battle – I want to better my life and hopefully the lives of

other Muslim women. I work for a community organisation that tries to improve people's lives, and we cover an area where there is a high Muslim population. Actually, I never imagined this is where I'd end up. We're holding a seminar for young people in our area (there'll be quite a few Muslims in the group) and it's one way of inspiring them and getting them to think that they are capable of big things.

For me, being Australian, Lebanese and Muslim had a lot of negatives. Now I don't mind people knowing about my heritage, but I don't want that to be the first thing they know about me. I'm really trying hard now to see the good things about having Lebanese parents and being a Muslim, but it's still a struggle. I get frustrated about the limited options. It isn't about having to live at home until I get married, it's about not having the choice to move out. It isn't about the gossip, it's about that nobody will stand up to the perpetrators. So what's good about it? My parents love me.

You'll Die a Virgin!

In Islam, sex is considered as one of the most essential human needs, and one that should be properly satisfied. In fact, it stresses the mutual sexual satisfaction between partners. But the Koran says it should only be practised and enjoyed between a husband and wife. The rule is the same for men and women: you must remain a virgin until you are married. Extra-marital affairs are *haram* (forbidden, in Arabic) as well.

Dalia is in her late twenties and a virgin. An older male friend told her that he had never met a girl who was a virgin. He said Dalia was a rarity. And another guy once joked, 'You'll die a virgin.' But all the Lebanese Muslim girls Dalia knows are in the same position.

Her friend Suha felt that she had to justify her stance on sex when she had conversations with men who weren't

Muslim. Many people found it hard to believe that waiting was really her choice.

'But I think they'd feel the same way about it if they grew up in my household,' said Dalia. 'All our relatives and family friends had parents who were married before they had babies. There's no such thing as de facto relationships. You're either married, engaged or single. There's nothing in between.'

Dalia says that in upholding her religious beliefs she cannot choose to have sex with a man she loves unless she is married to him. The loss and the consequences would be too great. She would put herself in real conflict with her family. She could be disowned by them and shunned by the community.

Suha says the idea that a woman does not have sex until marriage is instilled from a young age. Girls are taught that being a virgin is an asset. 'You grow up knowing that staying a virgin until you're married is something that's expected of you. My mum never told me not to sleep with a guy until I got married but it was an unwritten rule. She never talked about sex. God, she still gets embarrassed if she sees two people kissing on television. Her mum never discussed sex with her either. She just told me to respect myself and to never let a guy touch me.'

So if our mothers are private about their sexuality, then how do we learn about it? The way a lot of others girls do: television, school, magazines and friends.

For many Muslim parents, sex is a dirty word and a taboo subject that is seldom discussed. While parents

might be uncomfortable talking about sex, they are aware that their children will have lessons about it at school. One of the main reasons they don't or can't talk about it is because of their own cultural upbringing. It wasn't a subject that was openly discussed when they were growing up and because of that they are not comfortable in expressing their sexuality.

The idea that sexuality is shameful starts at a young age, when girls are told not to touch themselves because it is *ayb* (shameful, in Arabic). At the same time, girls are told that they can't take part in activities that might interfere with the hymen. Blood loss during sexual penetration is required in the culture to prove that a woman is a virgin when she gets married. Her reputation and her family's honour depend on her bleeding. When one girl started high school her father told her not to ride her brother's bike anymore. In fact any sports that might cause problems become off-limits. Most parents do not explain why, usually because the parent is too shy to talk about it, and many girls grow up believing that they can't take part because of their gender.

The teenage years are a time when many people begin intimate relationships with the opposite sex. But for Muslims this can only be done in the context of marriage. Loving someone is one thing but showing it through sex is different and should be controlled. Sex is always seen in the context of family life.

Because sex outside of marriage is not on, any activities that might lead to sex or create an environment

that make it easier to happen are banned. This includes dating, nudity, wearing revealing clothing and pornography. Sometimes young women are sent mixed messages: it's okay for them to talk to boys at school but if they do so at a community function then their character could be questioned.

Islam requires that both men and women be chaste and seek successful relationships in marriage. The virginity of both sexes is emphasised. There is frustration, however, that a woman has to prove that she is a virgin with physical evidence (this is not a religious requirement and Islam does not condone such prying), while a man is taken at his word or simply not expected to be one. Sex among Muslim males is so common that many girls do not expect to marry a virgin.

Suha and Dalia are both angered by the Lebanese community's double standards on sex. Many parents choose to be deaf, dumb and blind to what their sons get up to, but it's a different story if their daughters are involved. 'I hate the fact that my brothers and their mates can get away with it,' said Dalia. 'It's not like with a girl where there's supposed to be proof that it's her first time. I remember a story about a woman who gave her daughter a white hand towel on her wedding night and told her not to wash the blood off it in case her mother-in-law ever asked to see it. Thank God we don't hear about that happening anymore. These days, guys are better at telling their mothers to mind their own business. That's not to say, of course, that he doesn't expect his new wife to be a virgin! He wants a decent Muslim girl

who has never been kissed by any man but her father. It's okay for him to f… around, but not for her.'

Suha's husband, Samir, wasn't a virgin when they got married in their mid-twenties. 'We dated for a year before we got married but we never went past the kissing stage,' said Suha. 'I was too scared of doing wrong. There were times when I wanted more but there was something inside me, a little voice that made me stop at kissing. It's hard to say if it was because I didn't want to disappoint my parents, or God, or myself. Maybe it was all three.'

Suha admits there were times when she wanted to give in to her feelings. 'When Samir and I started dating I made sure he knew I was in it for the long haul and I wasn't going to be just another girl. I think I was my husband's first relationship where there was no sex when we were dating each other in secret. Once I'd told him I wasn't going to have sex with him until our wedding night, there was no pressure to change my mind.

'That's one of the advantages of seeing a Muslim guy – he usually doesn't ask you to have sex with him before the wedding. But if he does and you say no, he never pushes you. A Lebanese Muslim guy just gets that, whereas other guys find it a lot harder to get their heads around it.'

Samir was prepared to wait, even though he had been sexually active in the past. And even though he had had sex before, he expected that the woman he married would be a virgin. Does Suha think that Samir would have married her if she weren't a virgin? 'I admit my husband's a hypocrite,' said Suha. 'He slept with many girls but only

wanted to marry a virgin. I know he loves me but one of the things that most appealed to him about me was that I hadn't had sex with another guy.'

Dalia has non-Muslim friends who have sex but she has promised herself that no matter how tempted she is she will wait. 'Let's be honest,' she said. 'I could do it and my parents would never know, but God will know. I made the decision to wait until I am married because I want it to be with someone I truly love: the person I decide to spend the rest of my life with.'

Dalia recalls an experience with a man who considered her to be a challenge. 'He told me that he liked me because I wasn't "used goods". He wasn't Lebanese, and I know this guy had hit on so many girls. And one guy, who was supposed to be a good friend, told me he wanted my virginity as his birthday gift! I had to laugh.'

There are people who have tried to make Suha and Dalia feel like aliens for being virgins. In Suha's experience, it often came from girls who weren't Muslims. 'They said they respected my choice but then I found out they talked about my lack of experience,' said Suha. 'In the same way my family expected that I wouldn't be having sex outside marriage, these girls expected I would.'

In Islam, the test is to exercise control over oneself, not over others. For Suha, being a virgin was one thing she had control over in her life and she is glad that she waited until she got married. 'My husband tells me now that the biggest regret he has in his life is having sex with other girls before we got together and got married.'

What has changed him?

'I think he feels guilty that I waited and he didn't,' said Suha. 'And he knows that he committed a sin. The fact that he wasn't a virgin used to bother me, but I feel I have been true to myself and Islam.'

Suha and Dalia wanted to remain virgins because they want their relationship to be exclusive to the man they marry, and because it gives them a sense of control. But being a virgin until marriage is also what is expected of them religiously, and their choice is not to defy the religious and family values they have been brought up with.

Brotherly Love

Amina was just starting to find her groove on the dance floor when she felt a heavy hand on her shoulder. She turned to find her friend Maria flushed and out of breath. Between Maria's heavy puffing Amina made out the words 'dad' and 'outside'. It was enough to set the alarm bells off in Amina's head.

She rushed to her table, grabbed her handbag and pulled out her mobile phone. There were ten missed calls and a few missed messages. All of them were from her brothers.

'We can't stop him,' one of her brothers, Abdul, warned in a message. 'I'm driving him there.'

Amina's heart sank. She dialled Abdul's number and begged him not to let their dad go inside. 'Just get out here,' Abdul pressed. 'He's not impressed with what he's seeing.'

Amina said a few quick goodbyes and rushed outside. She spotted her brother's car and ran over. Her dad was sitting in the front passenger seat. He was angry, but so was she.

'You are so embarrassing, Dad,' Amina said, trying not to raise her voice at him. 'What is *wrong* with you?'

Her dad had been outside in the car long enough to observe a group of students standing round outside the hall. A few of them were smoking and one couple was hugging and kissing.

Her dad was not pleased. He thought Amina was attending a presentation night, a tame school event where dinner was served and awards were handed out. Amina hadn't explained that she was going to her formal and that there would be boys, dancing and alcohol.

Her dad had always disapproved of formals. He didn't want Amina going to one because to him it was like going to a nightclub. Now that her dad was there he wanted to take a look for himself.

Amina was the last of six children to finish high school, and instead of mellowing, her dad had grown more stubborn. He was upset that Amina hadn't invited him to the awards night. He was her dad and he thought he had a right to be there.

Amina couldn't believe her bad luck. Why now? Why, after all these years, did he want to know what went on at these events? He had never shown this much interest before.

He undid his seat belt.

'I just want to see for once what you do at these parties,' he said. 'I want to see who these people are. Who pays this money to go to this show?' He turned to Amina, who was sitting in the back seat. 'Are you embarrassed of me? Isn't it nice to take your dad?'

Amina wanted to scream. It was a school formal – not her wedding, for goodness sake!

Abdul was in the driver's seat and looked at Amina in the rear-view mirror. She caught his eye. He could see the anguish on her face. He understood her embarrassment and didn't want to see her humiliated in front of her school friends. So he turned to his dad and told him to forget about it. He was taking them home.

Amina told her dad that he couldn't get in anyway because he didn't have a pass and a stamp. He didn't need them really, but Amina thought that saying this would definitely keep him in the car.

Then her dad changed tack. 'Where is your award, Amina?' he demanded.

'I didn't get one,' she whispered.

'Why?' he continued.

'It's only for really smart people,' she said, realising after the words had come out that not only had her formal been ruined but now her dad thought she was stupid.

It wasn't the first time that night she had been tripped up. Earlier, when her friends asked her why her dad was outside she had told them that he was driving her to another party in the city. It wasn't a convincing story.

'I was the only girl getting picked up from my school

formal by my dad, and my friends thought I was a liar,' Amina said.

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It had always been a battle for Amina to get out of the house without any dramas. Sometimes she felt as though she had six dads. One was her biological dad and her five older brothers acted as if they were. It wasn't always their fault they acted that way. Their father expected that they would look out for their baby sister. Her brothers, like her father, felt it was their duty to protect the family's honour. That involved always knowing what their sister was up to and where she was going.

In their traditional household the patriarchy extended to the sons, who believed they were responsible for ensuring their sister did not do anything that might reflect badly on their family. The consequences would be huge if a girl in their family did something unIslamic, like having a boyfriend. She could never ever admit to it, even if she was seeing a boy. She would be asked to take an oath that she was telling the truth. And her every move would be monitored. She would be dropped off and picked up from school by her father and she would not be allowed to talk on the phone or go out without one of her parents.

Amina was close to all of her brothers, despite their protectiveness. They always came to her for advice about girls. Each one of them had asked to go with her to the formal, even her married brother. But what girl wants her brother tagging along? If she weren't allowed to take a

guy she liked more than a brother then she wouldn't be taking anyone. She would rather go alone.

Amina thought she had done everything right so as not to raise suspicions about where she was going for the night. She wore a plain black dress with sleeves, her long hair was in a simple style and she wore so little make-up it didn't look like she had any on. Amina getting dressed up always freaked out her dad. He considered beauty enhancement such as make-up and hairstyling to be for married women only.

It took some convincing, but Amina's brothers came round to the idea of her going to the formal, and that she was going on her own. They agreed that their dad didn't need to know all the details. They were strict but also understanding enough to know that their little sister didn't want to miss out on such an important event in her life because their father didn't approve. As long as she wasn't taking a guy behind their backs they were okay with it. 'My brothers are very protective but they also know when to back off,' Amina said.

While her brothers talk to her about girls, she is not allowed to even entertain the idea of a man in her life, apart from her dad and brothers. She is the youngest child and so her brothers feel a double pressure to protect her. Amina is not allowed to have a boyfriend or to go out at night without her family. Her brothers, however, live by a different set of rules.

Amina is eighteen but one of her brothers has already given her the marriage talk. 'Whoever marries you will

have to go through your brothers,' he told her. If the guy passes the test he can then meet her dad.

But not all her brothers thought the same. One of them couldn't even imagine her leaving home. 'You're staying here,' he said. 'You're not going anywhere. You're not going to get married.'

When guys ask Amina out, they tend to run the other way once they find out she has five brothers. She thinks that maybe the right guy will be the one who is up to the challenge.

If Amina does get married then her future husband will be judged on his occupation. Her brothers think they know best. They've told her not to consider bringing home a blue-collar worker; he wouldn't be good enough for their little sister. The irony is that one of her brothers is a panel beater. But the expectation is that Amina will marry a professional, like a lawyer or a doctor. So many Lebanese girls have supposedly had doctors ask for their hands in marriage. It's a status thing.

But Amina is not interested in meeting someone who works in an office and whose life is dictated by routine. She likes the idea of a guy who is good with his hands. She has told her brothers that she isn't interested in anyone at the moment but they worry that if she goes out with her friends she might end up meeting someone. They try to limit her movements so this doesn't happen. 'I've heard my brothers arguing with Mum because sometimes they don't like her letting me go out,' she said.

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The formal wasn't the only time Amina had made up a story to get out of the house. In Year 12 she chose to study hospitality, even thought she wasn't interested in a career in this field. What had really appealed to her was the idea of spending two hours every Wednesday night at TAFE. Her parents didn't have a problem with it as long as it was for school. So Amina decided to invent a second TAFE night. Her 'class' on Friday nights was her chance to hang out with her girlfriends. 'My dad bought the story,' Amina said. 'It was my bit of freedom.'

Amina suspects her dad eventually figured out she was lying but he never challenged her about it. She felt guilty but thought there was no other way to spend time with her friends at night on her own. But Amina was very selective about where she spent her time. 'After all the risks I had taken,' she said, 'I wouldn't go to a place unless it was worth getting busted for.'

Amina also lost track of how many times she used a friend's birthday party as an excuse for going out. At one point one of her girlfriends celebrated three birthdays in one year. Her dad didn't like parties, full stop. But he let her get away with it.

Whenever Amina told her dad that she wanted to go to a friend's place, her parents encouraged her to ask her friends to come over instead. When they did she ran into another problem: her dad didn't approve of the clothes her friends wore. One time he pulled Amina aside and warned her about one friend in a particular outfit. 'That kind of

dress isn't allowed in our house,' he spat. 'You've got brothers under this roof.'

Amina thought it was unfair that she was getting into trouble for what her friends wore. At the same time, she couldn't tell them what her dad really thought and decided it was better not to have them over.

Now that school is over, Amina is working in an office until she decides whether to go to TAFE. She is excited, not about the money she earns but because of the opportunities work presents for going out. How many 'work' dinners can she get away with in a week?

From Fast to Feast

It's 3 am. I'm up and ready to have breakfast and begin another day in the month of Ramadan. I eat three slices of toast with cheese, a few spoonfuls of yoghurt, a couple of biscuits and drink as much water as I can, knowing that when dawn breaks I have to give it all up until sunset. So, for sixteen hours during the day I am fasting and desperately trying to keep my mind off food and water.

For one month every year, I join the hundreds of millions of Muslims worldwide who give up food, drink, smoking and sex during the fast in order to cleanse their bodies and souls. The purpose of fasting is to teach self-discipline and to prepare for the suffering that comes with making sacrifices in the course of obeying Allah. Ramadan is also a period for giving and asking Allah for forgiveness. This year I want Allah to forgive me for telling white lies, snapping at my family and not making time for my parents.

Ramadan is one of the most important dates in the Muslim calendar. It marks the anniversary of when the Koran was first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. Fasting during Ramadan, or *Sawm*, is one of the five pillars of Islam. I will spend the next month showing self-restraint, strength and discipline by fasting from dawn to sunset. It will be a time for self-examination and increased religious devotion.

Ramadan opens my eyes to the world and I see how lucky I am to have the simplest things in life. For example, fasting gives me a taste of what it's like to be hungry or to go without something for a period of time.

Muslims believe that by observing the fasting faithfully some of their sins will be forgiven. Fasting during Ramadan is the most powerful time to fast. It is compulsory for every Muslim as soon as they reach puberty to observe the fast. Children are encouraged to learn to fast by doing so gradually, say every second day or on weekends, so they can be monitored by an adult until they are old enough to do it without creating health problems.

I am amazed by the self-control shown by young children when it comes to fasting. At first many of them are struck by the novelty of waking up at 3am for breakfast, and when that wanes what keeps them going is a better understanding of why they are fasting. I'm in my twenties and I have been participating in this ritual since I was eight. I still get embroiled in arguments about how unhealthy and crazy fasting is. A friend's daughter was once asked by a teacher why she was starving herself.

This is not the purpose of Ramadan. People seem to forget that I break my fast in the evening when the sun sets.

We break our fast – this is known as *iftar* – by first taking a drink of water and then eating a date, just as the Prophet Muhammad broke his fast. It is customary for our meal to begin with a soup. This is followed by a regular dinner of meat and salad.

The timing of iftar is announced on the radio or cable television when the *muezzin* intones the *adhan*, the call to prayer.

Many things can undo all the good that comes from fasting. This includes lying, being greedy, gossiping or making a false promise.

As a child, all I understood of Ramadan was that it was about experiencing hunger. I would fast because my family did.

The hardest thing is giving up water. At school, the teachers worried that I would dehydrate or faint, so I wasn't allowed to play sports. Nowadays, I hear that students are told they can't use fasting as an excuse to get out of sport.

It was hard being a teenager during Ramadan. There were times when I couldn't stand the heat and I was so thirsty. I couldn't bear being surrounded by my friends at lunchtime, so I would break my fast by getting something to eat from the canteen, hoping my family wouldn't find out. When I got home I pretended nothing had happened. I felt so guilty.

It wasn't fair watching everyone eating and drinking. Most of the time I could handle going without food, but

it hurt not being able to quench my thirst. I missed water so much. Sometimes people assume that you can still drink water while fasting and they are shocked when I tell them that I can't have anything, not even water. It's not like the 40-hour famine you did when you were in primary school, when you could still drink water and eat lots of barley sugar.

During Ramadan I would put water in my mouth but I didn't swallow, and every chance I had I would run to the nearest water bubbler and gargle, just to keep my mouth moist. As I got older I stopped doing this. You can only put water in your mouth for a good reason, such as an ablution. And even then you cannot gargle. I learned to look after myself and not to do things that took up too much energy.

When I became a young adult, Ramadan started to make sense and now I look forward to it each year. It is about giving up something for part of the day for a month. It can still be hard but I draw on the sense of achievement I feel when I break my fast at the end of a long day.

I tell my friends to give up something precious just so they appreciate what they have. That's how I feel about Ramadan. It's a special time in my life that brings not only my family closer (we all make a bigger effort to sit down as a family and eat together) but Muslims worldwide. We are united during this holy month.

Unlike Easter and Christmas, Ramadan doesn't fall on a particular day every year. It is based on the lunar calendar, so it moves through the year. Eventually it occurs

in each of the seasons. When Ramadan falls during summer, fasting is harder because the days are nearly sixteen hours long. Fasting begins at dawn and we cannot eat or drink until the sun goes down, usually after 7 pm.

I always think it's going to be hard, but each year it gets easier. I'm sure that has to do with having a better understanding of the purpose of Ramadan. It is about being the best person I can be, so there's no point in being grumpy about it.

The most common question I am asked is: 'How do you fast during the summer?' Well, when I'm not working, I sleep as much as I can during the day and hope the time will go faster by watching movies. Usually, I'm up really late, going to the fridge and drinking water or just nibbling on the leftovers. My eating period is reversed – it's during the night instead of the day. Of course, it's not so easy when you have to work and need to perform at your normal capacity.

There are times when I watch the clock and count down the last few hours. And they go so slowly.

Women cannot fast when they are menstruating. This is not very well known to non-Mulsims because men don't like to talk about such private things, which makes it harder for women to explain why they are not fasting. Anyway, I always appreciate the break but I have to make up my missed days before the next Ramadan comes round.

My friends are supportive. Many of them don't eat in front of me because they imagine how hard it is. They

comment on my weight loss and think of fasting as a way to lose weight. But the reality is that lots of people put on weight because they eat at night and go straight to bed. There's no exercise in between, except for prayers. And if you do lose weight during Ramadan, it doesn't last long.

The month of Ramadan ends in fine style when it's the time of the new moon. As soon as the sun rises on the next day, I join the thousands of men, women and children who flood the streets around Sydney's biggest mosque in Wangee Road, Lakemba.

Teenage boys dress in streetwear and the girls wear the latest designer threads. When I was younger the things I loved most about Ramadan were the new clothes my mum bought me for the Eid, and the money my parents and uncles and aunties would give me as a gift for having fasted. Now that I am older, I'm the one handing out money to my nieces and nephews.

We converge on the mosque for the morning prayer session to celebrate the end of the holy month. So begins *Eid el-Fitr* – three days of thanksgiving that revolve around rich food and sweets. The mosque is usually full by 6 am, so the thousands of others who spill onto the streets are kneeling together in the carpark and along the full length of the road outside the mosque. Police close the roads surrounding the mosque to morning traffic.

Leaving my shoes at the door, I follow the other worshippers into the women's section of the mosque. Men and women are segregated in the mosque, but when they pray they all bow in unison and place their faces on

the floor in worship of Allah. We have come to pray and to hear readings from the Koran in Arabic.

The service takes about an hour – it has been extended so that the faithful can hear senior Muslims discuss the issues affecting their brothers and sisters locally and overseas. This year we remember the suffering of Iraqis and Palestinians.

When it's over, the worshippers turn to kiss, shake hands and hug one another. Then the celebrations start. It's a time to reflect on what has been achieved in fasting over the past month and then the next three days are spent visiting family and friends to share food and socialise. My mother prepares a special family lunch that always includes vine leaves, and all day long I treat myself to iced almonds, pastries and Lebanese sweets such as maamoul.

When Ramadan finishes, families give *Zakat*, one of the five pillars of Islam, and it means giving alms. There are two types: *Zakat al-Fitr* (you cannot end the fast until you have paid and it is the value of one moderate meal) and *Zakat al mal* (also paid in Ramadan and is 2.5 per cent of savings). The money can be handed to mosque officials who will ensure that it gets to the right people or it can be given personally to individuals in need.

My Dad

It isn't like my dad to ask to do anything with me. So why is he asking me to go for a walk?

My dad doesn't like me going anywhere without one of my brothers, even if it's for something as simple as a walk around the block. He's always worried that someone is going to do something bad to me.

Why does he want to talk to me?

Whenever a Lebanese dad wants to have a serious talk with his daughter it usually has something to do with getting married. Does someone want to marry me? Does he want to tell me in private?

Whatever the reason, I am getting more nervous by the minute.

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My dad is a man of few words and while he is kind I have always found it hard to talk to him about anything. When

I was growing up I couldn't understand why so many people had such a good relationship with him. He was considered one of the community elders, even though he wasn't that old, and people would seek his advice.

When I was little my mum used to tell me I was his favourite. But my relationship with my dad changed dramatically when I reached my teens. We were always fighting, usually about me going out with my friends. My dad was always saying no. *No* to shopping with friends, *no* to going to the movies, *no* to everything that didn't involve being with my mum or one of my brothers.

And he was always so concerned about how something I did would reflect on him. 'What will people say about me?' was one of his mantras. His attitude angered me because it meant that I couldn't have friends outside of school. By my mid teens I decided that the best thing to do was to say as little as possible. I was tired of fighting. We fought about everything, from the clothes I wore to my hairstyle. He preferred it long and I liked it short. He liked being in control.

Our relationship deteriorated so badly that we barely spoke to one another. Dialogue was limited to 'hello' and 'how are you'. He never asked me about school and I never asked him about work. Sometimes we'd pass each other in the hallway without a word between us.

When he did speak to me it was because he wanted me to do something for him. This usually involved fetching him a glass of water or finding his slippers. Such requests always made my blood boil, especially because he

never expected the same from my brothers.

Despite our differences I loved my dad and to not do what he had asked of me would have been disrespectful. That doesn't mean that I didn't wonder why he couldn't get his own water or slippers. It wasn't as though he was missing any limbs.

I blamed my mother for his ways and resented her for it. She pampered him so much that he expected the same treatment from me.

My parents had a traditional view of their roles – my dad was the breadwinner and my mum looked after the household. My dad has never cooked a meal for us. It's not only my dad, though. There is a whole generation of boys and girls who have grown up never seeing their dads in the kitchen.

When I was at home I never spent time with my parents. Most nights I ate dinner alone in my bedroom because I didn't feel as though we had anything to talk about. Sometimes my parents objected to this but as I got older they decided to accept it and to leave me alone.

At one point I seriously thought I might have been adopted. I didn't look like anyone in my family and my personality was completely different.

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When I look back on my teenage years, I realise that some of my problems with my parents were exacerbated by the language barrier. My parents spoke little English and I spoke only basic Arabic. When they asked me something in Arabic, I responded in English. When I tried to speak to

them in Arabic my conversations broke back into English. A lot of the time I understood what they were saying in Arabic but I couldn't respond in Arabic because I didn't know the right words. One time I asked my older brother to translate into Arabic what I was trying to say to them. But many times things got lost in translation, and usually it made things worse for me.

At school I had a whole different personality. I spent a lot of time there doing the things I couldn't do at home, like playing sports, although I wasn't allowed to stay after school. To me school was like a little holiday.

My mum tried to break down the walls I had built up but I didn't want to listen. She would follow me into my room and try to comfort me. She told me that I had to stop back-chatting to my father because he hated it, and that I had to be more patient. But now that I'm older I realise my dad did care; he was just very bad at showing it. I suppose this is typical of many men of his generation.

My parents never showed any affection towards one another. They had seven of us so I know that they had to have been intimate. But they didn't kiss, hug or hold hands when we were around.

My parents immigrated to Australia in the mid-1970s. They were both young (in their early twenties) and to them Australia offered a better life for the family they wanted to have.

My dad was the youngest of five children and came to Australia with only a small luggage bag, little money and no family to support him. His plan was to find a job and

to save as much money as he could for six months so that when my mum followed him to Australia she would have a place to stay. Because he had little education and no formal skills, my dad worked in factories. Six months turned into a year.

My dad has held on to many of the cultural values that his parents had instilled in him. Sometimes I think he lives in a time warp. But no matter how bad things got between us I have always respected how my dad puts his family first. He believes it is his duty to provide for his wife and children.

My fondest childhood memory is of my dad keeping a promise to buy me a doll. He came home from work exhausted but that didn't stop him from taking me to a toy shop. I was seven. Although he became a strict man I know he has a soft side.

Until now I never considered how much courage it took to move to a foreign land and to leave your whole family behind. I don't think I could do it. When my dad first got here he didn't speak English and had to use hand signs to communicate. He lived with a group of male friends, who he still keeps in touch with. It was common back then for the men to rent a place together before their wives came out or before they found a wife. They cooked for themselves during this period too. Funny how they forgot about that when there was a woman to run around after them.

My parents have been married for thirty years and my mum says the reason they have stayed together so long is

because they respect each other. When they came to Australia there was little time to learn to speak and read English. Their main worry was that my dad had a job and that there was food on the table.

Mum also left her family in Lebanon. Her youngest sister was just three years old. She lived in Australia for twenty years before she visited her home again.

Dad's strictness began with my mum. He didn't like her going out without him because she didn't know Sydney and didn't speak the language.

My mum has a quiet nature, but that doesn't mean she lacks confidence. Once I walked in on her when she was listening to a cassette and reciting the words. She was trying to learn English through a correspondence course. But it didn't last; she was pregnant with her fourth child and had other priorities. As I got older it was painful to see her struggle with English. Sometimes she asked us to help her but we were selfish and couldn't find the time. Both parents relied on us to translate correspondence for them. This included our school reports, so you can imagine how much we left out. My brothers weren't doing well at school and they were eventually caught out. My dad asked one of his friends who spoke good English to accompany him to one of the parent–teacher nights. That was the end for my brothers. Dad found out that they were disruptive in class and didn't do their homework. My parents decided to get them a tutor and they were forced to sit in the living room with the tutor so that my parents could keep an eye on them.

I was thirteen when I told my parents that I wasn't going to be the kind of girl who got married as soon as she finished high school. I wanted to study and have a career. My dad might have been strict but he never pressured me to get married. When I was still at school, men would visit our home to ask for my hand in marriage.

I only recently found out from Mum that Dad would tell them he didn't have a daughter old enough for marriage, even though in a lot of people's eyes I was. If only I had known this when I was growing up, maybe it would have helped me understand him better.

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So I did join my dad on that walk, and I'm glad I did because it turned out to be the most important walk of my life.

I had just finished high school and he asked me what my future plans were. With that one question I suddenly saw a side to my dad that I hadn't seen before. It felt as though he was trying to be my friend.

He told me that I should continue my education and not be in any hurry to get married. For my dad to tell me not to depend on a man meant that he was turning his back on tradition. He had grown up in an era where only the boys were encouraged to pursue their education and to experience life before settling down. But my dad wanted the same for me.

He has never wavered on this issue. When a community elder questioned my career path as not being

appropriate for a girl my dad told him that he was wrong. Dad was proud that I was the first family member to go to university.

A lot of my determination to succeed in life comes from watching my dad work hard and my mum work even harder to raise seven children.

I have never forgotten my dad's words. When I am feeling down I draw on them for strength.

My Mum

I could hear my mum sobbing in her bedroom. It wasn't the first time. Her door was shut. It was her way of telling us she wanted to be alone. But I couldn't stand it any longer. I wanted to know what was wrong, so I slowly opened the door and stuck my head in.

Mum was sitting on the edge of her bed with her back to the door. Old black-and-white photographs were scattered over the bedspread and she was holding one in her hand. I crept up behind her to get a better look. She was staring at a picture of her parents, brothers and sisters. None of them lived here with us.

Since my dad immigrated to Australia, he had been back to Lebanon a few times to visit his family and to take care of family business. When I was ten I remember him promising my mum that she could go back to see her family, but money was always an issue. The biggest hurdle

they faced, however, was finding someone to help take care of us children if Mum went away. Dad had to work and there was no way he could cope with having to look after five children under the age of ten as well.

My mum was so absorbed in the photo that she didn't notice me standing behind her. I tiptoed out of the room and slowly shut the door behind me. I felt terrible because I knew how much my mum was missing her family.

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My mother came to Australia in 1975 and this year (2005) she celebrates thirty years in this country. She was twenty-one when she got married and said goodbye to her family in Lebanon. She didn't know when, or if, she would see them again. That's what it was like back then. She was getting on a plane for the first time, to begin a new life in a country thousands of miles away. When my mum left, her youngest sister, Hala, was just a toddler.

My mum tried hard to stay in touch with her family. She would write them letters, send photos and sometimes phone them, but it was hard because Lebanon had plunged into civil war and the phone lines were bad. Many Lebanese Australians who travelled to Lebanon during this period carried letters and presents for people they didn't even know. But they felt it was their responsibility to make sure the correspondence was delivered to the right people.

My mother did end up with family in Australia. Five years after she moved here, her big brother, Hisham, followed. He lived with us for many years until he found

a job and saved enough money to move out with his young family. Back then it was common for two or three families to live together until they had enough money to go their separate ways.

But more than anything my mum longed to see her mother and father. She often felt helpless when they needed support. They were affected by the war, as were many of our friends. We heard stories about how women and children didn't go out for fear of being kidnapped or shot. My mum tried to send money every few months so that they could afford to buy food. She wouldn't spend the money my father gave her to buy clothes but put it aside so that she could send it to her parents.

Thousands of other Australian Lebanese men and women were in the same boat. Many families in Lebanon depended on family members who had emigrated to send money back. To this day many families, particularly those in the villages, depend on those who have left for money to buy food and clothing.

My mum decided early on that if she couldn't visit her family, then she would try to get her mother to come out to Australia. My *tayta* (grandmother) worried about my mum when she left Lebanon and had heard gossip that my mum was unhappy with my dad. But when Tayta came here she saw for herself that my dad was good to Mum. He gave her everything she wanted, if he could afford it.

I was about five when my tayta came here for the first time. She brought me presents, even though she didn't

have much money to spend. My mum had four kids then and was pregnant with her fifth.

Over the years my mum has made many sacrifices. Many times she was invited to weddings or parties but didn't go because she wouldn't leave us on our own. She believed her priority was to raise her children and never to depend on other people, including her friends, to babysit. She ended up with seven of us, and whenever we complain about life she reminds us how she spent all those years at home looking after our big family. All the women she knew were in the same situation. They had left their families to travel to another country for a new life. They had little money, didn't know the language and had no family for support.

I never really appreciated the pressure my mother was under all those years ago. Sometimes I couldn't understand why she didn't just get on a plane and go back to Lebanon to visit her family. But going to Lebanon was a huge challenge then, not just financially but emotionally as well. Those who returned to Lebanon were not sure if they would get back to the families they had started in Australia. A war was on. Also, people were just starting to make a life for themselves here and many couldn't afford to go back, especially with their wives and children. I remember whenever someone did go back, tens of family and friends would converge on Sydney airport to farewell them. They would say goodbye as if they might never see them again. These days, not a day goes by without hearing that someone's going to Lebanon for a holiday.

It took twenty years before my mum could return to Lebanon. We had seen on the news how Beirut had been destroyed during the war. But Lebanon was my mother's home and her heart ached when she saw how the people were struggling.

I was eighteen when she decided to go. I had just finished school and was starting university. Mum found it hard to leave us; it took months for her to be persuaded to go.

She packed four suitcases. Most of what was in them was not for her but for her family. The bags were filled with presents for brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews. She had packed twenty years of gifts! And her sister Hala wasn't a baby anymore; she was a married woman with two children.

It was an emotional time for our family. We were so used to Mum being there and for the first time we would have to do things without her. She was going to be away for three months, but when it happened it felt like much longer. We were excited for her but worried about how we would cope. We agreed not to let it show so that she wouldn't change her mind and stay. I didn't believe that she was gone until I saw her plane take off. But I was so happy for Mum. We all were. She deserved a big holiday.

We did cope without her, but only just. My dad had to cook for us for the first time. Sometimes he had the cordless phone in one hand and a pen in the other taking instructions from Mum on how to make simple meals like *kafta* (mincemeat) on skewers, bean soup and rice. I was

responsible for helping him in the kitchen and my sister helped clean up. For the first time my brothers had to make their own beds, and they also helped fold the washing. That's when we really began to appreciate all the work Mum did around the house. It was something she never complained about. She wanted us to focus on our studies and was happy for us to play, so she did everything and only occasionally asked her children to help. Even my sister and me. Most girls I know had the opposite experience. From a young age they were expected to help with the cooking and cleaning. I realise now how much we took advantage of my mum's generosity.

Photos of my mother when she was a teenager show her looking radiant with silky long black hair and shapely dresses. She always wore her hair out and it was so long it touched her bottom.

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When she returned from Lebanon, her attitude towards Australia had changed. She didn't feel like a visitor anymore. Australia was home. It was where she had watched her children grow up and where her children are now raising their children. When we were young, my parents, and a lot of other parents, would talk about how they wanted to set themselves up here but return to Lebanon in their old age. Now you don't hear that so often. Some people have tried, but most of them discovered they didn't want to stay in Lebanon and so returned to Australia. My friend's dad has been here for 35 years. His parents are buried in the village where he grew

up and all his family, his seven brothers and three sisters, live in Lebanon. But he says he wants to be buried here, where his children and grandchildren live.

My mum had a lifestyle in Australia that could not be matched in Lebanon. She had become accustomed to order and the pace of life here, and everything would have been more of a struggle in Lebanon. Lebanon had changed so much in the years she had been away. It was a real eye-opener for her. One of things that really surprised her was how open people had become to Western influences, including music and clothing. While my parents had held on to the values they grew up with in Lebanon and passed them on to us, their relatives in Lebanon had moved on. Mum said that the girls she knew in Australia actually dressed more modestly than the girls she had seen overseas. One woman also observed that she had seen more religion in Australia than in Lebanon. My mum realised that her romantic visions of Lebanon did not match the reality.

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My dad runs a small business and it has only been in the past ten years that Mum has helped him in the shop. She has always been a shy woman and for most of my life she only spoke to people she was related to. She never struck up conversations or friendships with people she or my dad didn't already know. She struggled with English but the French she had learned at school in Lebanon helped.

My dad took care of everything outside the house. He did the shopping and paid the bills. He believed it was his duty to be the provider while my mum took care of

things at home. But Mum actually wanted to do the things most people took for granted, like banking. It wasn't as if my dad would have said no if she had asked to do it, it was just that he saw it as his responsibility.

As I got older my mother's confidence grew and slowly things changed. She learned how to get on a bus and to get to the local shopping centre. My father now depends on her to make sure the bills are paid on time. She had learned how to drive and even got her licence but didn't have the courage to go out on her own. The main reason she wanted to drive was that she grew tired of depending on her friends to take her out when my father was away. But as we got older and got our driving licences, she started to depend on us to drive.

My mum would've liked me to get married in my early twenties but she didn't want me to make a mistake. When Dad said that I was ready for marriage my mum would tell him that I wasn't. She wanted me to take advantage of all the opportunities I had that she never did. She could see that I was ambitious and wanted to study.

Sometimes I think my mum lives her dreams through me. When she was younger she wanted to travel to other countries but never got the chance. So she was happy when my job opened those doors. She would tell me to do as much as I could as a single girl because once I got married my priorities would change. She was right.

I am thankful for my mother's guidance and love her for sacrificing so much to give my brothers, my sister and me a solid home when we were growing up. I have it easy

compared with what she went through when she was my age. Now that I live with my husband, she is just a short drive away. I couldn't imagine having to get on a plane to see her. I hope I can be as good a mother to my children as she has been to me. I realise now how much I took my mum for granted. I hope I can make it up to her.

Keeping My Head above Water

Funny country, Australia. Women go to Bondi beach half-naked and no one bats an eyelid. Yet when I want to cover up, I am told it is not on.

This is what happened one Saturday. While you were enjoying a sleep-in on a cold winter's morning, I was up at 6.30 am, getting ready for my weekly swimming lesson at the Sydney Aquatic Centre at Olympic Park.

A year ago I signed up for adult learn-to-swim lessons and I've been committed to my early morning regimen. I was at the pool the day Ian Thorpe was dramatically disqualified from the 400-metre heat at the Australian team selection trial for Athens. Actually, I was a few metres away in another pool, working on my freestyle.

I have no desire to be a Petria Thomas. My dream is more realistic: I want to swim the 50-metre length of the pool without stopping. But towards the end of the lesson

my instructor told me that next term I would not be allowed to have lessons in a rash top.

Rash tops are officially called sun vests. They are made of lycra and are figure-hugging (depending on the size you choose to buy, of course) with short sleeves.

No one had ever had a problem with what I wore to lessons before, so my instructor's words came as a surprise. I asked if she was talking about the same top I had worn to every lesson at the pool for the past year. The same top I had purchased from the centre's own swim shop.

'Yes, that top,' she said. They were introducing a new policy, she explained to our group of five swimmers, and rash tops and boardshorts would be banned in the pool.

As a Muslim I choose not to wear a swimming costume as it means my shoulders, underarms and thighs would not be covered.

I tried to explain that I wore the top for religious reasons. I also explained that if the rash top was banned I could not attend any more lessons. It was as simple as that. Something as simple as a rash top made all the difference to me.

But my instructor said that the management had decided that rash tops 'hinder the swimmers' ability in the water, and as they were designed to screen UV rays, they were never meant to be worn indoors in the first place.'

I was standing in the pool when she broke the news and I got so angry I found it hard to continue the lesson. My top was just like the ones worn by the swimming instructors, except their rash tops had the word 'Instructor' emblazoned on the back.

'Will the instructors also be asked to stop wearing their tops?' I said hotly. No, she said that was different because, unlike me, they were not learning to swim.

My instructor was sympathetic but explained that it wasn't her decision. She suggested I take the matter up with the aquatics supervisor.

A couple of the swimmers in my class encouraged me to speak to the management. They were confident that I could get an exemption from the rule if I spoke to someone about it in person. But I didn't want to be treated as a special case. I was also worried about the other Muslim girls who would be forced to abandon their lessons because they were not as confident to voice their concerns as me. What about the girls who don't want to wear a swimming costume for reasons other than religion? Girls who feel self-conscious or find bathing costumes unflattering?

In a modern secular society, thousands of Muslims, just like me, face the challenge of straddling two different cultures – one in which a day at the beach in a swimming costume is a way of life (a religion, you could say), and the other that considers swimwear to be immodest.

But the message many of us get from the wider Australian community is confused. Sometimes, it seems that you are damned if you do and damned if you don't. For example, in 2002 a gym for Muslim women opened in Sydney, the first of its kind in Australia. However, the publication of an article about the gym in a tabloid newspaper sparked heated debate on talkback radio over whether the gym should be allowed to continue operating

a Muslim-only facility. People wrote letters to the newspaper saying what a joke the gym was and asking when the government was going to stop bowing to minority groups.

The manager of the gym had special approval from the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board to accept only Muslim women. The club argued that it was providing an important community service as religious custom does not permit a woman to reveal her body in the presence of a man who is not her husband. This makes it difficult to exercise in conventional fitness centres. In fact, for many women this is not an option.

I wanted to participate in an activity that was open to everyone in the community, but the ruling about the rash tops left me feeling like an outsider. I didn't think the top hindered my ability to swim. Actually, not wearing it would make it harder for me as I wouldn't feel comfortable without it on. Shouldn't my comfort as a student count for something? Shouldn't the emphasis of a swim school be on learning?

When I spoke to the aquatics supervisor, he told me the centre would recommend that swimmers not wear rash tops but those who did so for religious reasons would not be precluded.

'Why the turnaround?' I asked. 'Was the decision to allow swimmers to wear the rash tops for religious reasons in response to complaints from swimmers?'

'No,' he said. He agreed the swim school needed to show flexibility towards people's different religious needs.

But the school would recommend that swimmers not wear rash tops because they can slow them down and make it more difficult to learn.

'Aren't rashies specifically designed to not have drag?' I said.

'If you're jumping around in the surf it may not make a difference but in a learn-to-swim environment with an emphasis on streamlining they do create resistance,' he said. 'The all-in-one rash suits that are a proper fit are not as restrictive.'

'But what about swimmers with self-image problems?' I argued. 'Will they be told to remove their rash tops?'

'Yes,' he said. 'We are concerned with teaching them lifesaving skills. There are many ways you can improve the self-image of a child in the water. Wearing a loose rash top because they feel conscious of their weight or size only makes it more difficult for them to learn to swim, thus reinforcing their own misconceptions of themselves.'

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I was in primary school the first time I got into a pool. I had swimming for sport and once a week I would walk with my classmates to the local pool.

I have a vivid memory of my mother shopping for outfits for my older sister and me to wear in the water. We ended up with yellow and blue leotards. My mother thought the sleeves made the outfit less revealing. I don't think she even knew what ballet was. All she knew was that what she had chosen looked like a bathing costume, except with sleeves.

I watched as the Anglo girls in my class dived into the deep end of the pool. They made it look so easy. But I never got past the floatie and kickboard level in the shallow end. One of my girlfriends recently told me that as she got older her mother asked her to add shorts to the leotard. Her mother had obviously shopped at the same place as mine! The shorts were followed by a T-shirt, so my friend gave up swimming because it was too much fuss trying to deal with all the extra layers she had to pile on.

Throughout my entire thirteen years at school I never once swam in an event at our annual swimming carnivals. I got involved in other ways, like helping teachers on the sidelines, singing my house song and cheering on the swimmers from the stands.

In my last year at school, my friends and I decided to jump into the shallow end of the pool when the official racing had ended. None of us had been in the water that day. The teachers declared half an hour of free time in the water and Minties were thrown into the pool. But my friends and I had only been in the water for a couple of minutes when we were ordered out by the PE teacher. She told us we couldn't stay in the water because T-shirts and shorts were not proper swimming gear.

That was eleven years ago. Now in my late twenties, I refuse to be ordered out of the pool for wearing a rash top. I have been taught to respect a woman's right to wear whatever she pleases. If her taste in fashion is a boob tube top and short denim skirt then that's her prerogative. Who am I to judge? However, when I want to wear more

clothes the respect does not seem to flow the other way. Apart from those few swimming lessons in primary school, that was all the swimming I had done.

Until now.

It took three terms of swimming classes – thirty days all up – for me to learn how to float in shallow water, push and glide from the side of the pool, float on my back, perform a basic overarm action for 12.5 metres, kick on my back for 15 metres, do backstroke for 12.5 metres, tread water with a buoyancy aid and enter the deep water and recover to the side.

At the end of my third term I received an award for completing the adult beginner program and I was ready for the adult intermediate class. I am now working towards swimming freestyle. I haven't quite got my head around breaststroke yet, but backstroke is good because I don't have to worry about my breathing.

When I first started lessons I was more nervous about how I looked than about getting into the water. I would choose a seat for my bag that was close to the side of the pool. I didn't want to linger in my swimming gear, and only took off my tracksuit when I could see my instructor was ready to begin the class.

I always get in as quickly as possible and I'm relieved when my body is hidden beneath the water. When I get out, all I can think about is getting my hands on my towel so that I can cover myself. It's hard not to feel self-conscious when everyone around me is wearing what is expected of a swimmer. The last thing I wanted when I

started lessons was to attract attention to myself. I felt relieved when I saw other girls at the pool in boardshorts and tights. And now the ruling about rash tops and boardshorts was going to single me out again.

In fact, when I first signed up for lessons I didn't dare ask the sex of my swimming instructor. But I secretly prayed that it would be a woman. Had it been a man I would have had to reassess the situation. Swimming at a pool attended by both sexes was one thing – I could get away with that with my parents – but being taught by a man was something else.

And my encouraging female instructor during my first two terms at Homebush made all the difference. She would take my hand in hers at the end of each lesson and hug me when I performed a task particularly well.

I wasn't going to give up swimming now that I'd come this far. And I was going to continue to do it in my rash top.

Soft Targets

It's Wednesday morning at one of Sydney's biggest railway stations and the trains are packed with commuters. Iman manages to hop off at her stop just before the doors slam shut.

She pats the straps of her headscarf, which is wrapped neatly around her head and neck. It took some ducking and weaving to get off the train in time and she wants to check that all the pieces are still in the right place and that none of her hair has been exposed.

The trip into the city was wet and miserable and Iman is relieved that she didn't leave home without an umbrella. She joins the throng making its way out of the station and is lost in her thoughts about the day ahead.

Suddenly, she feels a tug from behind. A man she recognises from the train is pulling at her headscarf, and then, suddenly, he hooks his arm around her neck.

Iman screams for help – 'You're choking me!' – but the men and women nearby just shuffle past and drop their gaze.

Tears well in her eyes as she recounts what took place. 'They just ignored me. The place was packed and people could see what he was doing to me. But they didn't care. It was as if they were happy to see a Muslim in trouble.'

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Since September 11, the Sydney gang rapes and the Bali bombings, Australia's 300 000-strong Muslim community has experienced an increase in abuse and harassment, particularly towards women and children. There have been reports of taunts in the school playground, verbal abuse on public transport and physical attacks in shopping centres. The tolerance factor towards Muslims was especially low in the months immediately after September 11.

One teenager, Nasreen, said her young cousin was in tears because her best friend at school had told her that she didn't want to be friends with a Muslim. 'How do you comfort a seven year old when it comes to that?' said Nasreen. 'Somebody had obviously told her friend to stay away from Muslims because they're bad.'

In another incident, Hiba, a Sydney mother of five, was abused at a checkout at her local grocery store. A woman in the queue told her: 'Go back to your own country. I've escaped here to get away from people like you.'

Hiba, whose headscarf marks her out as a Muslim, was shocked by the unprovoked rant. Her daughter was with her and told the woman to leave her mother alone. When

Hiba's other children found out what had happened they said they didn't want her going out without one of them accompanying her.

Muslim women who wear the hijab have borne the brunt of the attacks. Some of them began to think twice about going out because they didn't want to be humiliated. Others refused to hide and live with a victim mentality. Many of them, however, followed an unwritten rule: drive with the windows up. That way they avoided being spat at, having cigarette butts thrown at their faces and being told to go back to their country (although a lot of them were born here).

At the time Muslim leaders went on the defensive and appealed for a greater understanding of Islamic values and traditions.

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Two years have passed since the attack on Iman at the railway station. Since then she has noticed a shift in community attitudes towards Muslims. More people in the streets acknowledge her, often with a nod or a smile, as if to say, 'I don't think you're a terrorist.'

The attack has made Iman more conscious of the people around her but she says she understands why some people might be afraid of her.

'I would be just as afraid if I didn't know anything about a religion that is only ever in the news when it's a story about death and destruction,' she says.

She reluctantly returns to that wet Wednesday morning when she fought to free herself from her

attacker by pushing him away and stabbing him in the face with her umbrella. She gave police a statement about the attack, but she was too scared to pursue her complaint.

Iman now wishes she had had the strength to follow through with it. 'I was afraid of what would happen to my family,' she says. 'I didn't trust anyone.' She said the police later told her that the man was seriously injured in one eye.

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One woman who did ask the police to investigate was Sana. Her story begins on a city-bound train.

Sana was travelling into the city with her sister-in-law, Dalal, to attend a protest rally against the war in Iraq. During the trip a woman got into an argument with a group of Muslim girls who were practising an anti-George W. Bush chant. They were obviously headed to the same event.

The commuter was offended and told the girls to shut up. She got a hostile response and when she got up from her seat she spat in the group's direction and said, 'You fucking Arabs, I hope George Bush kills you all.'

Sana had never witnessed such inflamed tensions on a train before. The woman, who was red in the face, moved to another seat.

'My sister-in-law wears a hijab and I have seen people roll their eyes at her in shopping centres and not give way to her at roundabouts, but I have never been a victim of racial abuse,' said Sana.

Not until that day on the train.

The agitated woman got into another argument with

protesters who were handing out leaflets. She complained about what they were doing and a bunch of commuters started yelling for her to get off at the next stop. Then the woman was beside Sana, saying to Dalal, 'What are you doing here? Go back to your own country.'

Dalal asked the woman where she came from, but the two began to argue. The woman turned her attention to Sana. 'Are you one of them too?' she asked.

Sana said, 'I am an Australian and I am proud of it and I'm not very proud of what you are doing.'

'She didn't know I was a Muslim,' Sana explained. 'I don't wear the hijab and I've got pale skin, blonde-tinted hair and green eyes.'

Before the woman got off the train she turned to Dalal and Sana and spat at them. The spit landed on Sana's arm. 'It was disgusting. No one has the right to assault me like that. I wasn't going to let her get away with it.'

Sana and Dalal got off at the same stop and followed the woman through the ticket gates. Fortunately, they spotted two police officers and explained what had happened. Sana pointed the woman out to them. 'I looked around and there was a group of people from the train standing next to me, supporting me.'

Sana had been heading to a protest about a war but found herself making her own protest against prejudice.

The woman was approached by the police and told she had to go with them to the police station. When she refused, they grabbed her by the arm and she was later charged with resisting arrest.

'They took us to the police station and got our statements,' said Sana. 'Afterwards I found out that she assaulted police at the station as well.'

Months later Sana and Dalal were in court putting their side of the story. 'It was my first time in court,' said Sana. 'I got into the witness box and it wasn't a pleasant experience.'

But Sana felt it was her duty to be there for all the Muslim women who had been abused and didn't have the courage to take action. 'A lot of women don't want to bring attention to themselves and they don't want the hassle,' she said. 'This woman was so aggressive. I was affected. So many times I questioned whether I should pursue it.'

The magistrate found the woman guilty. She was also fined and given the chance to apologise, but refused.

Sana's sister-in-law now refuses to travel on public transport with her children.

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It took many months for Iman to build up the courage to get on a train again. Then, to her horror, she encountered another bigoted commuter.

'I finished work early one afternoon and instead of calling home to get picked up I decided it was time to catch the train again,' Iman said. 'When I got on, I felt a little emotional.'

Iman was only a few stops from her destination when a woman with a little girl got on. The woman started complaining loudly about the slowness of the train and

Iman sensed that something wasn't right. She didn't want to make eye contact, so she buried her head in a book. But Iman was forced to look up when the woman yelled, 'It's probably because of that Bin Laden slut.' She was eyeballing Iman. Then she got out of her seat and walked towards her. Iman froze.

'She stood next to me and began unbuttoning her jeans, like she was getting ready to piss on me. It was humiliating. I kicked her between the legs and jumped out of my seat.'

Iman got off at the next stop to report the incident to station staff. Another passenger who got off at the same time was walking closely behind, and this made Iman nervous. 'I was scared and kept looking back, thinking, what now? He noticed because he said, "Don't worry, I just want to help." He told me he had seen everything and wanted to make sure that I was okay. He said if I was going to complain to someone about it that he was prepared to be a witness.'

Iman was touched by his kindness. 'Unfortunately we didn't exchange names, just a smile and a thank you.'

Iman didn't ask for the police to be called. She thought the woman may have been mentally unstable or influenced by drugs.

Iman's parents were outraged when they heard what had happened and wondered if she should replace the hijab with a hat so that there was nothing in her physical appearance to indicate she was a Muslim. 'They thought the hijab had made me an easy target,' Iman explained.

'But after all I had been through there was no way that I was going to be beaten.'

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While Sydney has the biggest Muslim population in the country, Melbourne also has a strong and active Islamic community. To address concerns about attacks on Muslim women, the Melbourne-based Islamic Information Services Network of Australia published a booklet containing twenty-four safety tips. This included the advice to travel in groups.

The day after September 11, Melbourne teenager Amira and her sisters were told by their father to stay home from school. He wasn't sure how people would react towards Muslims. But Amira argued that she didn't want to hide from people.

She and her friends did end up experiencing abuse, but never told their parents. 'My friends and I were egged by a group of guys as we left school,' she said. 'Another time I was harassed by a group of guys.'

As well as publishing the booklet, the network had also set up a helpline for Muslim women to report harassment or violence. Amira and a group of friends discovered first-hand how fast the service responds to calls for help when they called the hotline as a prank.

'We told them we needed help. We were shocked when ten guys showed up.' The volunteers were not impressed. 'It made me realise how serious things were,' said Amira. 'They told us it wasn't a joke and to take it more seriously.'

When Amira and her friends got into some real trouble they were so scared they forgot about the hotline. The girls (all but two of them wore the hijab) were walking to a shopping centre when they were surrounded by teenage boys who swore at them.

'I could see the hatred in their eyes,' Amira said. 'They kept telling us to watch our backs.'

When the girls screamed for help, the boys took off and yelled back, 'You fucking terrorists, we're going to blow you all up.' Amira said, 'They even threatened to rip off our hijabs and to wipe their bums with them.'

Amira and her friends were also shocked when a man across the street encouraged the boys, telling them to 'Get them. They deserve it.'

'For the first time in my life I hated Australia,' said Amira.

The girls didn't tell their parents because they knew their response would be to keep them at home and not let them go out on their own. Amira said, 'My parents were already thinking about packing up and moving back to Lebanon and I didn't want to give them any reason to actually do it.'

The anti-Muslim sentiment spurred by the so-called 'war on terror' has also tested some of Amira's friendships. 'I hung around with a big group of girls who came from different ethnic and religious backgrounds,' she said. 'But I noticed that the non-Muslims were drifting away from the group.'

Amira was sad that religion had got in the way of

friendship. 'I thought these girls were my friends but then they started saying bad things about Islam. They were repeating things they'd heard on television. In the playground we were sometimes called terrorists. We never used to be identified by our religion, but after the Bali bombings some of our friends started looking at us differently.'

Amira now wants to educate people about the true essence of Islam and hopes that contributing to an Islamic youth magazine will help. 'It's a start,' she said. 'It's my way of helping to change attitudes about Islam in this country.'

Lebanese = Rapist = Terrorist

'Hey, Elrich…you're a terrorist.'

'Have you got a bomb?'

'You fucking Leb.'

People are shouting abuse from the grandstands during a soccer match between Parramatta Power and Adelaide City Force at Hindmarsh Stadium in Adelaide. Their target is Ahmad Elrich.

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It was October 12, 2002 – the day after 202 people, including 88 Australians, were killed in a terrorist attack in Bali. Emotions were running high across the country.

'People began calling me a terrorist and Bin Laden,' Ahmad said. 'It was getting out of control. They can make comments while they're hiding behind a crowd but they wouldn't be able to say it to my face. It got so bad that

at one stage I just wanted to jump the fence and put a stop to it.'

Instead, Ahmad decided to let his feet do the talking. He kicked a goal that made the score 2:2.

'I ignored the idiots and focused on my game. Their words made me more determined to score and to show them what I was really made of.'

As the crowd cheered, Ahmad ran over to the stand where he thought the hecklers were and put his index finger to his lips. It was his way of telling them to shut up.

After the game he reported the incident to his assistant coach and the club's chairman, but Ahmad decided not to take it any further. He thought it had only been a small group of ignorant spectators.

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Ahmad has become a role-model for young men, and his biggest fans are the Lebanese Muslim men who are proud to see someone like them doing well at something.

At seventeen, Ahmad was working as a builder and playing soccer part-time for the Parramatta Eagles. When a National Soccer League club was being set up in the Parramatta district, Ahmad attended the trials and became the youngest member of the Parramatta Power soccer team. He had no formal Institute of Sport training but his skill with a soccer ball was enough to impress the head coach. His flamboyant style attracted the attention of the local media and he was soon dubbed 'the entertainer'.

He went on to become the longest-serving Power

player, with more than 100 games to his name. Then in 2001 he made his debut as a Young Socceroo, playing his first Youth World Cup in Argentina. Now he is a Socceroo, a 2004 Olympian, and he has his sights set on playing for a European Club.

But Ahmad's rise to the top coincided with the trials of a group of young Australian Lebanese Muslim men for gang rapes. The young men were accused of pack-raping teenage girls in August 2000. The ringleader was sentenced to 55 years in jail, with a non-parole period of 40 years. The Muslim community in Sydney, where more than half of the country's Islamic population lives, came under intense pressure.

They were as shocked and appalled at the rapes as the rest of the community, and Muslim leaders condemned the criminal acts. But once the accused men were convicted for what were described by many as 'racially motivated gang rapes', in some quarters Muslim men began to be labelled rapists.

Ahmad's family and friends became anxious that he might be a target for abuse and discrimination. They warned him to stay away from trouble as his actions would be judged in a climate of fear and anger towards Muslims. His parents were proud of him and didn't want anything to destroy the respect he had worked hard to earn or to jeopardise his future in the sport. So Ahmad turned down social invitations and attended only work-related events.

'I felt like I was the one on trial,' Ahmad said. 'I stayed away from any environment where I would be questioned

about my name and nationality. Many of my friends had problems with people because they looked Middle Eastern. They also kept a low profile.'

It wasn't only the boys who experienced hostility and prejudice. During the rape trial, Taghred Chandab received a death threat after having a letter published in a newspaper. Her letter had urged greater tolerance towards the Lebanese Muslim community, but one reader managed to track her down to her workplace and sent her a disturbing handwritten fax. It read in part: 'Stop defending those fucking Lebs or we will do to you what they did to us.' It was signed: KKK.

Another young woman who wrote about her religion was told, 'What a time to out yourself.' The comment was actually made by a supportive colleague, who believed in what the woman was doing but also understood that she might become a target because she was identifying herself as a Muslim.

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Little was written at the time of the trials of the emotional and psychological impact the court cases had on many of the men in the Muslim community. Muslim leaders received reports that men of Arab background were being stopped in the streets by police because they looked suspicious.

Ahmad said it wasn't easy being a Muslim in Sydney during that period. Muslims had a bad name, and things got worse when the rapists' actions turned into a debate

about race and religion and stopped being seen purely as criminal acts. 'Some people still think that because you're a Muslim you're also a terrorist, a rapist, a violent person,' Ahmad said. 'It made me wonder how I was supposed to talk to a non-Muslim girl without her fearing I would attack her. I didn't speak to any girls and those who spoke to me would ask me about my background and my thoughts on the gang rapes.'

Another man who believes he was questioned by police because of his appearance is Hussein Hussein, an Olympic boxer. He thinks the gang rape trials affected the way many young Lebanese Muslim men interacted with the wider community. 'Guys were getting defensive and had a chip on their shoulder,' he said. 'We were all on trial.'

Talkback on Arabic radio was dominated by Lebanese Muslims who spoke out against the rapes. Some Muslim leaders lashed out at the media's portrayal of Muslims. One religious figure wrote a newspaper article stressing the need for Lebanese parents to educate their children to be 'proud of our religion and background, and also proud to be Australian'.

It is reasonable to have a debate about problems facing a particular community, but crime is not unique to any one group and it is not legitimate to smear the reputation of an ethnic or religious group because of it. When people commit crimes against humanity in the name of religion, as in the case of September 11, then there is going to be criticism and misunderstanding. That's when responsible politicians and community and religious

leaders must provide leadership and guidance. The response of people of Islamic faith was that these were not the actions of a true Muslim.

With the gang rapes and terrorist bombings, the Lebanese Muslim community has been in the spotlight. What is particularly upsetting is that when the term 'Middle Eastern' is applied, people, sometimes unfairly, think 'Lebanese'. And when 'Lebanese' is applied, they think 'Muslim'. At the time of the Bali bombings many in the Islamic community couldn't help thinking, 'Oh, could it get any worse for Muslims?'

The Teenage Bride

Sarah was following family tradition. Her mother was married in her teens, and when Sarah was five her older sister visited Lebanon and got engaged at fifteen. Ten years later, Sarah too was engaged. At fifteen.

Sarah first locked eyes with Bilal at a suburban shopping centre. 'This guy just comes up to me and it was so funny, he goes… "Hey, you dropped something," and then he walks off,' Sarah explained.

She leaned down to pick up the small scrap of paper he had left behind. It read: 0491 736 089.

At the time Sarah was in Year 9. The next day, feeling nervous and unsure about what to say, Sarah dialled the number. She and Bilal have spoken to each other every day since.

That was eighteen months ago, and throughout that

time both sets of parents were unaware of Sarah and Bilal's blossoming romance.

It wasn't the only thing Sarah hid from her parents. She had used her pocket money to buy a mobile phone, which she put to good use making and receiving secret late-night calls from her boyfriend. Bilal knew never to call her at home.

Sarah would go to bed early, switch off her bedroom light, snuggle up under her blanket and whisper into the mobile phone to Bilal. They spent most of their time planning when and how they would next meet up.

One night Bilal surprised Sarah. 'We were talking on the phone and he said, "I want to get engaged to you." At first I was shocked, like – what the hell?'

Things moved very quickly after that. Bilal's mother contacted Sarah's mother to introduce herself and arrange a time to visit. Bilal's family was keen to meet Sarah and her family.

Sarah told her mother that she had met Bilal a few weeks ago. She said that she liked him, but could not reveal that she had been getting to know him for more than a year. Seeing a boy without her parents' knowledge and spending time on her own with him was forbidden. There would be too many questions to cope with, including questions about her chastity, and Sarah thought it was best that they didn't know about Bilal. But Bilal didn't have to explain how he knew Sarah.

Before the visit took place the families collected information about the other side, a standard practice when

the families don't know each other. Both sides were satisfied with what they heard about the other: decent, hard-working and God-fearing. Just four days later, on a Friday night, Bilal's family visited Sarah's home for the first time.

Sarah made a late entrance. Fifteen minutes after Bilal's family had arrived, she greeted them in a new outfit her sister had bought her especially for the occasion. Her mother had earlier advised her to allow some time after Bilal's family had arrived, as it was good to keep the potential husband and his family guessing. There were other advantages: Sarah would not appear desperate for a husband and Bilal's parents would think she was no easy catch.

When the families sat down together in the living room, Sarah was expected to do some of the hosting by helping her mother serve peanuts, cold drinks and coffee. This gave Bilal's mother the chance to get a closer look at her. Some mothers also use this as an opportunity to assess how good a girl is likely to be at domestic life.

After trying to cram a few decades of family history in two hours, Bilal's father finally explained the real purpose of his family's visit. Bilal was expected to let his father speak on his behalf, as a mark of respect to the patriarch of the family, so he watched on as his father addressed Sarah's parents. Bilal's father said that his son was a good boy who worked hard, had shown he could be responsible because he had saved enough money to put a deposit on a house and could offer Sarah a comfortable life. Bilal was

four years older than Sarah and worked in the construction industry.

Sarah's parents spoke for her. They agreed that she and Bilal should be given the opportunity to get to know one another better. However, for their relationship to be considered *halal*, or permissible under Islamic law, both families recited *Al-Fatiha*, the first *surah* (or chapter) in the Koran.

Fatiha is also referred to as the Thanksgiving Prayer and means 'the opening' in Arabic. The Fatiha was read to invoke the blessing of Allah. Its recitation meant that Sarah and Bilal intended to get to know one another and they were doing so with the blessing of their families.

Both were relieved that their relationship was finally out in the open. They would not have to see each other in secret anymore, although there would continue to be limitations on how affectionate they could be towards one another.

Following the ritual reading of the Fatiha, the families agreed that there should be a celebration. An engagement party would be held the following weekend.

The backyard of Bilal's parents' home was transformed into a party venue, with the couple sitting on two elevated couches and exchanging rings before more than fifty family and friends. Sarah had invited some of her school friends. Guests were served Lebanese sweets while Arabic music blared in the background. A patch of grass became the dance floor for the women to perform village belly-dancing.

Sarah and Bilal's engagement was not a green light for them to spend time on their own or to have sexual relations. Holding hands or kissing was not allowed as this could only happen after they were married.

The ceremony was simply a promise to marry at a future date, and the commitment they had made meant that no third party was supposed to approach either one of them for marriage.

When Sarah and Bilal went out together to cafés, the movies or to the beach, they had to be chaperoned by Bilal's older sister. This was designed to protect the couple from gossip as, in theory, the sister could be called on as a witness to their time together. Bilal's sister would leave home with them, but then she would disappear for hours at a time when they were no longer in their parents' sight. She understood her brother and Sarah needed some privacy.

Sarah's parents had settled in Australia in the late 1970s. They expected, like all Lebanese Muslim parents of that era, that Sarah, even as a second-generation Australian, would marry someone within their group and from their religious faith. There was a strong desire to preserve religious and ethnic identity through marriage.

As that was the experience of all the people around her, Sarah never even entertained the idea of getting to know a guy who was not Lebanese Muslim. She always thought she would hook up with someone who could speak Arabic, understand and practise the basics of her religion and share her cultural values.

There was much excitement among Sarah's friends when she turned up for school after her engagement party. Sarah attended a public high school in Sydney and had a big group of Year 10 friends. Most of them shared her background, and she was the only one who was engaged.

'Because we didn't want to do anything wrong, we decided to tell our parents about our relationship,' said Sarah. 'It was very exciting.'

By 'wrong', Sarah meant being intimate. She doesn't deny sharing private moments with Bilal – they had held hands, hugged and kissed – she was human. But if she and Bilal were to go beyond this level of relationship, then they would have to marry. Only then could they live together and have sex. Even after their engagement, overt displays of affection in public were considered inappropriate.

By 'exciting', Sarah meant being considered mature enough to socialise without her parents and being allowed to have a mobile phone.

Before they got engaged, Sarah used to jig school to spend time with Bilal. They would hang out together at parks where there was little chance of them being seen; they would take advantage of the dark corners of a movie theatre to show each other their true feelings.

Sarah's movements outside school were restricted before she got engaged. She had trouble persuading her parents to let her go out with her school friends and they even said no to friends' birthday parties. As Muslims, they

did not celebrate this event with a big show and they were worried Sarah would be exposed to things they didn't approve of, such as alcohol. But they never took the time to get to know her friends' parents to establish whether she would be safe in their homes.

When not at school, Sarah spent most of her time at her sister's place helping to babysit her five nieces and nephews. 'I felt relieved that I didn't have to do things behind my parent's back anymore,' she said. 'Before, it was hard to go out together because we were scared people might see us and talk about us, especially because I come from a Lebanese background and there's a lot of gossipers.'

Sarah's school friends were not surprised when she announced her engagement to Bilal because their culture encouraged marriage at a young age. However, Sarah got a different reaction from two school teachers when she shared her news with them.

Showing off her gold diamond ring, she said, 'Hey, miss. Look – I'm engaged. They didn't believe me until I showed them the engagement photos. They were devastated because Anglos usually stay with a guy for ages before they get engaged. They congratulated me but told me to make sure I was doing the right thing because I was still young.'

One of the teachers had some news to share as well. Like Sarah, she had recently become engaged, only after an eight-year relationship with her boyfriend!

Sarah's family supported her engagement. 'My mum was happy because she always worries about me,' she said. 'She just wants to make sure that I've got someone. She

wants to be sure that I'm going to be looked after.'

Sarah was confident that Bilal was the right person for her. 'It's not a parent thing,' she insisted. 'I'm the one who introduced him to my parents. He's very caring.'

Sarah planned to get married as soon as she finished Year 10. She wouldn't go on to Year 11 and 12 but instead wanted to sign up for a hairdressing apprenticeship at TAFE.

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One month after Sarah got engaged she sent one of her friends a text message. It read:

its sarah I broke of da ingagement yestday nyt.

By this time Sarah regretted the engagment. She said her relationship with Bilal failed because he had grown possessive. She'd thought being engaged would give her more freedom but was distressed to discover that Bilal didn't like her going out on her own with her girlfriends. He wanted to know her every move.

Sarah enjoyed dressing up and going out at night, but it turned out that Bilal preferred to stay at home. She also felt that Bilal wasn't paying her enough attention and her frustration boiled over during an argument with him on the phone.

'That night, I don't know what got into my head,' said Sarah. 'I told Bilal, "I don't want this anymore." And he said, "But why?" I couldn't take it anymore, so I said to my mum, "That's it, do what you have to do, I don't want this ... *khalas* (enough in Arabic)."'

Initially, Sarah's mother was upset because the

engagement was only a month old. She worried about the impact of a broken relationship on Sarah's reputation. She didn't want her to look like a girl who didn't know what she wanted, and it was not a good thing that Sarah's name would be linked to Bilal's for years to come. It was better to only have ever liked one man.

Sarah's father didn't have much to say. He was happy to watch from the sidelines as his wife took control. She called Bilal's mother and told her in Arabic: '*Mafi naseeb.*' This meant that their children were not destined to be together. She wished his family the best and said she did not hold any bad feelings towards them and hoped they would feel the same.

Since Sarah was the one to call off the engagement, she was expected to return all the jewellery she had been gifted from Bilal: two gold rings, a gold necklace and a matching gold bracelet. She also returned the presents she had received from relatives and friends at the engagement party.

Sarah now thinks that she was more attracted to the idea of being engaged than actually being engaged. Although she's no longer with Bilal, things have changed permanently for her at home – in a positive way. Her parents have recognised, if not in words then in actions, that one of the main reasons Sarah accepted Bilal's proposal was for the new freedoms that being engaged offered. 'After I broke up with Bilal, my mum said I could keep the mobile and she let me go out more, but only with friends she knew really well,' she said.

Sarah's teachers offered some advice when she told them she had broken off the engagement. 'One of them was like, "You're too young, anyway,"' said Sarah. 'It's weird to Anglos. They don't get engaged until they are much older, like thirty-two. They told me I was wrecking my life, to go and study and have a career. They said getting married at a young age wasn't going to get me anywhere!'

Sarah is no longer in contact with Bilal and has decided to take a break from boys. She now says, 'I want to do something with my life. I'm too young to be engaged. Maybe later on…when I'm about eighteen or nineteen.'

Destiny on the Internet

What do you look for in a partner? Honesty? Good looks? A sense of humour? Brains?

Well, if you're a Muslim then your list must also include a person who shares your religious background. A Muslim woman must always marry a Muslim man. She is also encouraged to choose someone from the same cultural group she was brought up in. When this list for prospective partners must include religion and culture, then the range of men immediately narrows.

The general argument for choosing someone who shares your religion, language and culture is that the relationship will be less complicated. Western society fosters the notion that a person should find their romantic partner by chance and that if you do look for love in an organised way, then something must be wrong with you. But in an age where people are constantly complaining

about how hard it is to find a partner, what's wrong with being introduced to someone where the potential for a suitable match is enhanced?

Muslims believe in the notion of *naseeb* (destiny, in Arabic). The word is used in everyday life as one way of explaining why things happen. Naseeb is the idea that Allah has a plan for every person. In the context of finding love, the idea is that a Muslim will meet the right person when Allah wants it to happen.

Mariam, a team coordinator and communications assistant, is twenty-eight and single. She wants to find a Muslim partner and is part of a growing number of Muslims turning to modern technology for help – the Internet.

Mariam was introduced to a website that is dedicated to connecting young, educated and professional Muslims – people with similar backgrounds. Mariam found out about *naseeb.com* from one of her girlfriends. She was serious about meeting someone but thought Naseeb was a silly idea.

'My friend said she found this cool site,' explained Mariam. 'I said, "Get out. As if I am going to log on to that. As if I would try it."'

But eventually Mariam, who has had two failed engagements, overcame the negative feelings she had about online romance. 'I thought, "What's it going to hurt if I set up my own profile? No one's going to know it's me."'

Once she was over her initial reluctance, Mariam found herself logging on at least ten times a day. The idea of

making new connections and a growing desire to meet someone became really exciting. 'I would rush home and the first thing I would do was log on to check if there were any messages,' she said. Now Mariam has settled into a more relaxed routine and only logs on once or twice a day.

Mariam had already tried the arranged family get-together to get to know a prospective husband. 'Arranged' did not mean that she was being forced to marry someone but that she was introduced to men through her own family, who had her best interests at heart. But this hadn't worked for her.

It's a fact that many people meet their future partners at work. Mariam works for a company where there are Muslim men but she hadn't met a suitable partner. Unlike Mariam, many young Muslims work in an environment where there are no potential partners. One of her girlfriends works in an office with a few hundred employees but not one of her male colleagues is Muslim.

More Muslim parents are recognising the difficulties their children face in finding a match, so they have relaxed the rules about mixing with potential partners. Some girls now have the opportunity to get to know a man over coffee or lunch with their parents' knowledge, but even this has its limits. It is not considered appropriate to stretch the time spent with this person as dating is not allowed. A girl is expected to know within a few short meetings whether the boy is right for her.

The Naseeb website gives Mariam some control over

her love-life. She has the opportunity to look for someone based on her particular tastes. Therefore, the chance of selecting someone who is suitable is greater.

Mariam uses her real name on the website, while her friends have chosen pseudonyms. When she signed up, she was asked some basic questions. This included her age, annual income and education. Mariam said that a compatibility quiz tried to gauge what sort of a Muslim she was – traditional, liberal or progressive. She was asked questions such as how frequently she prayed, whether she kept all her fasts during Ramadan, how she felt about eating non-halal food, what she would do if she had to attend a company party and alcohol was being served, and whether she thought it was appropriate to have dancing or music at weddings.

When she logs on, Mariam has the option of chatting online. Now she has added a photo to her profile, which was a big step.

'At first, I felt so exposed,' said Mariam. 'I thought, "Oh my God, some pervert is staring at my picture."'

Mariam has noticed a big increase in the number of Australians using the US-based website. When she first searched under men in Australia in the 25–35 age bracket, there were just seven names. Now she says there are more than twenty pages for Australians. Mariam believes that word of mouth is behind the surge in interest.

The website promotes stories of couples who have found love and marriage through Naseeb. Nevertheless, a few of Mariam's friends still think the site is for the

desperate. But Mariam thinks that if it has worked for some people, then it might work for her.

'I hope that I will meet someone,' she said. 'You never know. I'm not ashamed to say it.'

Mariam estimates that only about 50 per cent of people who have responded to her profile are genuine. The others didn't take the process seriously and were only out to have some fun.

She met up with one of the men she got to know through Naseeb during a recent trip to New York. Mariam has ruled out a romantic future with this person but says she is happy to have made a friend. Naseeb is not just for people who are single but for anyone who wants to make new friends.

But Mariam hasn't given up on finding love. Every time she logs on she still hopes that the next click will be the one.

Call to Prayer

Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar
(God is great, God is great)
Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar
Ash-hadu Ann'la ilaha ila-llah
(I testify that there is none worthy of worship
except God)
Ash-hadu Ann'a Mohamadan Rasulu-llah
(I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God)

And so the *muezzin* calls the faithful to prayer. But this is not Riyadh or Cairo. It's Sydney, and the sound comes from behind the partitions of a small office in a building that houses the Australian arm of one of the world's largest information technology corporations.

Raneem has downloaded the adhan, or call to prayer, onto her PC. Three times a day it reminds her the time

has come to perform one of her most important religious obligations: praying (*Salat* in Arabic). It's lunchtime, so it's time to pray the *Zuhr* – the midday session.

Raneem stops typing and heads to the ladies' room. Standing in front of one of the basins, she takes off her shoes and socks and rolls up her sleeves to begin the ablution (*Wudoo*). Before she can pray, she must wash the parts of her body that are generally exposed to dirt.

The Wudoo is carried out as follows:

Step 1. INTENTION
Raneem forms the intention that she is conducting the following exercise for the purpose of worship and purity. She starts by saying *Bismiallahir* (In the name of God).

Step 2. WRISTS
She washes her hands up to the wrists, three times.

Step 3. MOUTH
She cups a small amount of water into her hand and rinses her mouth out with it. She does this three times, to ensure her mouth is clean and no food is wedged.

Step 4. NOSE
She sniffs water up her nose and blows it out to cleanse the nostrils three times.

Step 5. FACE
Both hands are cupped to fill her palms with water. She splashes the contents onto her whole face three times with both hands.

Step 6. ARMS
She washes her right arm three times up to the end of the elbow, and then does the same with the left arm.

Step 7. HEAD
Raneem runs her wet hands over her hair once.

Step 8. EARS
With wet fingers she wipes the inner sides of the ears with her forefingers and their outer sides with the thumbs.

Step 9. FEET
Raneem lifts her right foot up to the basin. She washes it up to the ankles, three times, and then does the same with the left foot.

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With one foot still in the basin, Raneem is interrupted by a work colleague. 'What are you doing?' the woman asks.

'I'm cleaning my feet so that I can perform my midday prayer,' Raneem answers. The woman stares back disapprovingly. She then shakes her head and tells Raneem she is disgusted that anyone would use the basin to wash her feet. The basin, she says, is for washing hands.

Raneem is prepared for such a reaction. 'Women have walked in on me washing my feet and asked me what the hell I'm doing,' she says. 'But I like being asked questions because it gives me a chance to explain why I'm doing it.'

Raneem explains that as a Muslim she is performing an ablution. She is unable to pray until she has done this.

She also tells the woman that her feet are clean and that there is no need to be put off by her actions.

Raneem then remembers a story her scripture teacher once told her when he was in a similar situation. She repeats his words to her colleague. 'How often do you wash your face?' she says.

'Once in the morning and once at night,' the woman replies defensively.

Raneem explains that she washes her feet up to seven times a day (for each of the five prayer sessions, and when she showers in the morning and at night). That makes her feet cleaner than her colleague's face. The woman is stunned.

'Sometimes I have to be blunt about it because people can be ignorant and refuse to listen,' Raneem says. 'I always wipe the basin before I begin and make sure it's clean when I'm done.'

Raneem uses a clean towel she brings from home to dry her face, hands and feet.

She is now ready to start her prayer. She can keep the ablution, the cleansing, for as long as she can during the day. Once she passes wind or goes to the toilet she must renew her ablution. Ablution must also be renewed after sleeping or sexual intercourse.

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Raneem heads to the security room where she will perform her second prayer session of the day. She finds her prayer clothes (a long, flowing white skirt and matching headcover) and a prayer mat in a bundle in a corner of the

room, where they remain between prayer sessions.

Raneem pulls the prayer clothes over her pants-suit. For her prayer to be valid, she must cover her whole body from head to foot. Only her face and feet remain exposed. For most of the prayer session, her hands are tucked under the long headcover, which must cover her chest and bottom.

She has already locked the door behind her. As you must not break off a prayer, Raneem must make sure that she is not interrupted. Sometimes she forgets to lock the door.

Raneem moves the mat into the correct position. It must face the Ka'bah (also spelled Kaaba) in Saudi Arabia. The Ka'bah is the sacred shrine in the Great Mosque in Mecca. It is revered by Muslims, who believe it is the holiest place on earth. Millions of Muslims visit the site each year on pilgrimage, or *Hajj*, as is commanded in the Koran (or Qur'an).

When Muslims pray, they must orient themselves towards the shrine. For Sydney residents this is north-west. Many Muslims own a Qibla compass. The compass shows the direction to Mecca (known as the Qibla) and it comes with a booklet that shows the direction to it from many cities of the world.

Raneem has been praying at work for the past year. She decided it was no longer good enough to use work as an excuse for not praying. Praying was an important part of her religious identity, and while work was important to her, she felt her relationship with God was more

important. One day she would have to stand before Allah and account for her actions. She had been warned that Allah would not accept work as the reason for failing to carry out her prayers.

Salat (praying) is one of the five pillars of Islam. Although it is preferable for Muslims to worship together in a mosque, a Muslim may pray just about anywhere (factories, offices, universities and gardens).

Raneem has committed herself to praying the required five daily sessions. No one can be forced to pray; each person must come to their own decision. Parents are expected to teach and encourage their children to pray from the age of seven. Once a personal commitment is made to start praying, it is haram to wake up one day and decide that you don't want to do it because you can't be bothered or for whatever reason. Sick people and the elderly who struggle with their mobility are encouraged to perform their prayers while sitting down.

Raneem's working hours mean that she has to perform three of her five prayers – the *Zuhr* (midday), *Asar* (mid-afternoon) and *Mughreb* (sunset) – at work. She prays the *Fajar* (dawn) before she gets dressed for work and the *Isha* (evening or late night) when she gets home.

Raneem's role as a premises supervisor involves ensuring that all the buildings her company operates are well maintained, safe and secure. 'Sometimes I'm so busy with work I don't have time to eat,' she says. 'Often, I miss the call to prayer because I'm not at my desk. But I always make it up when I return to the office. I'm very conscious

of time when I'm on-site. I memorise the prayer times, and after I've helped secure a job I rush back to the office and head straight to the security room. I take five minutes out to pray. There are times when I pray two sessions because I missed the window to perform the earlier prayer.'

It's no secret that Raneem prays at work, but she doesn't go out of her way to advertise it.

'So many people take a smoke break several times a day,' she says. 'I use that time to exercise my right to observe my faith. When I first began praying at work I approached my boss to tell him what I would be doing. I explained that I was a Muslim and that I had an obligation to pray five times a day.'

Raneem's boss supported her decision. He said she could use the security room whenever she needed to conduct her prayers. He gave his word that no one would interfere with her religious obligations.

'He accepted my decision and to be honest I don't think he really had much of a choice,' Raneem says. 'He did ask if it would interfere with my work – fair enough – but I reassured him that every prayer period would take no longer than five minutes.' One time, when Raneem's praying was still new to her boss, he wanted to talk to her about an urgent matter but couldn't find her. So he sent out a small search party.

Another time, Raneem was halfway through her prayer session when she heard the door opening behind her. 'Then a man whispered an apology and shut the door,'

she says. 'I couldn't break off my prayer to turn around and see who it was. When I finished I raced over to my boss to find out if it was him.'

It was. He wanted to view some security footage and wasn't aware it was Raneem's prayer time. 'I decided the best thing to do was to give him a list of my prayer times, so if he was looking for me he would know where I was,' she says. 'He's a great boss and respects what I'm doing. As long as I am doing my job, that's all that matters.'

Raneem is aware of her rights in the workplace. Her company's human resources policy stipulates that a person cannot be discriminated against on religious grounds, including the need to pray at work. She discovered the rule when she was reading the policy before employing some security guards.

'It's good to know something like this exists in a company manual,' she says. 'I don't think a lot of people realise what their rights are at work and are too afraid to ask.'

The Marriage Ceremony

My father and brothers showed the guests to their seats. From my bedroom I could hear the crowd gathering in the backyard. It would be a while before I was expected to make my entrance, so I sat on my bed in my pyjamas.

The sheikh was due to arrive in half an hour, after all the guests were seated, so I had plenty of time to get changed. I was expected to dress modestly in the presence of the religious leader. I kept my outfit simple: a white silk-satin shirt and black formal pants.

I wasn't sure what to expect because I'd never attended an Islamic wedding ceremony where the bride joined the guests from the start of the show. And I was to be that bride! I looked at myself in the mirror and took a deep breath. Earlier that day I'd had my hair styled. It was up in curls and off my face. I got dressed and gave my hair one last spray to make sure no hair was out of place.

I was getting more nervous and restless by the minute. At least an hour had passed between the first guest arriving and the sheikh making his entrance.

There was a knock at the door. When I opened it, the man standing before me was Tarek.

'This is it,' he whispered. 'We're finally getting our act together.'

I could tell he was nervous. It was the first time I'd seen him that day. He gave me a kiss on the cheek before taking my hand and leading me out of the room.

Tarek and I had only had a short engagement (which simply involved our families reading the Fatiha, the opening prayer in the Koran, before deciding to hold a ceremony to sign our marriage certificate.

The bride can nominate a male, known as the *wakeel,* to represent her during the wedding ceremony. Most of the time it is the father. The idea that a daughter is prepared to put her personal life in her father's hands is considered one of the ultimate gestures of love and respect, although some people would argue that it has more to do with the father's traditional role as the head of the family.

When one of my brothers got married, his fiancée chose her father to be her wakeel. Along with all the women in my family, she sat in our formal lounge room as the ceremony took place in our backyard with the sheikh, her father, my brother and my father. Also present outside were other male guests. The windows of our lounge room look onto our backyard. They were open and the blinds

drawn so we could hear and see most of what was happening.

Such ceremonies can also be held at the office of a religious leader or at a reception centre.

As the religious ceremony for my brother's wedding drew to a close, the sheikh came inside with my brother, the bride's father and my father, while the guests remained seated outside. Once inside, the sheikh sat next to the bride and asked her if she was a willing party to the marriage. When he was convinced she was, he asked her to sign the marriage certificate. It already had my brother's signature on it.

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Now it was my turn and I wanted things to be different. I wanted to take a seat next to my fiancé at the start of the ceremony so that we could sign the certificate together in front of our guests.

Tarek took my hand and led me out to my place at a table that faced our guests. The table had been specially covered with a white cloth as a mark of purity. There were also several glasses of water and the Koran that the sheikh had brought. In front of the table were fresh bunches of flowers that some of the guests had brought with them. I was so nervous getting to the table that I couldn't focus on any one person. All I remember was seeing a sea of heads and feeling the stares.

Tarek took his seat next to me. The sheikh, my father and Tarek's father were also at the table.

The sheikh recited the important words *Bismiallahir*

*Rahmanir Rahim (*In the name of God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful) before starting the ceremony. These words are uttered at the start of any formal Islamic gathering to invoke the blessing of God. Practising Muslims must also recite these words before eating and at other important times, such as when making a speech. The words appear at the beginning of every chapter in the Koran, except the ninth.

Tarek and I sat nervously as the sheikh read out our rights and duties as husband and wife. In Islam, the man is not considered superior to his wife. They are equal but have different responsibilities. The husband carries more burden than a woman – he is responsible for the wife's maintenance, including shelter, clothing, food and general care. The wife is responsible for taking care of the children (as is the husband) and looking after the household when the husband is away. The man is also expected to offer his bride a marriage gift (*Mahr*) that has been agreed on by the parties. The Mahr is a mandatory gift. It can be in the form of money, jewellery, clothing or other material things. Typically the Mahr is divided into two portions – one is given in advance while the other is postponed and promised in the event of the marriage breaking down.

I was presented with a gold coin, a diamond ring and a gold necklace with a matching bracelet and earrings. Tarek and I had spent weeks shopping for the jewellery. I knew exactly the kind of diamond ring I wanted him to buy me. His parents had chosen the gold jewellery. If we were to break up I would keep the jewellery and

be entitled to an amount of money that had been agreed on before the marriage certificate was signed. Islam requires that a woman be compensated (usually financially) at the end of a marriage because she makes many sacrifices during marriage. The money is intended to help the woman get back on her feet in the event of a break-up.

I reciprocated by giving Tarek a watch and a silver wedding band (Islam forbids men from wearing gold as it has been deemed an extravagance exclusive to women). A woman is not expected to give the groom a gift but it was something I wanted to do.

The sheikh continued to read out our rights and responsibilities, first in Arabic and then in English to ensure that people with limited Arabic understood exactly what was being said. More young couples like Tarek and me are turning to religious leaders who can speak both languages.

The most crucial question for both of us came when the sheikh asked if Tarek and I were entering the marriage free of coercion. The question must be repeated three times and each time the sheikh must be satisfied with our response. This is to dispel any doubts about the validity of the union. The sheikh has the power to call things off if he is not convinced of the feelings of one or both of the parties.

Tarek and I responded *naam* (yes, in Arabic) each time the question was put. Before the sheikh signed the certificate he asked the guests to read the Fatiha to bless the union.

The signing of the marriage certificate meant that legally we were husband and wife. In practice, however, we could not live together or consummate our relationship until after a wedding party had been held. We had waited so long to be together that a few more months weren't going to kill us. And the only way I was going to be able to leave home with my parents' blessing was in a wedding dress.

Once the religious ceremony ended, our guests were treated to Lebanese sweets and given a small gift (Bomboniere) as a symbol of our union.

Tarek and I had known each other for almost a decade and we decided to sign the marriage certificate not long after our engagement because without it we would have been forced to endure the burden of a traditional engagement – *the chaperone*.

Even as two adults in our twenties, we would have had to drag along a third party every time we went out together. The thought of having a sister or a brother sit with us during a romantic dinner at a restaurant, or while we watched a movie at the cinema, was very unappealing.

The ceremony was our way of getting around this. We could now spend time together on our own without having anyone in the community question our motives or actions. It was the only way to stop tongues wagging when we were seen together.

But we decided to hold off on submitting our marriage papers to the Department of Births, Deaths and

Marriages. There was no need for our marriage to be legally recognised until we lived together for the first time as husband and wife. At this stage it was enough that our marriage was recognised under Islamic law. So our relationship at this point was more like an engagement.

After we signed the marriage certificate, Tarek went back to living with his parents and I continued to share my bedroom with my teenage sister. In the eyes of our family and friends, our relationship would be recognised as a marriage after a public wedding celebration.

Traditionally, celebrations for a wedding party kick off with a *laylia*, the Lebanese equivalent of a hen's party. However, most wedding parties reflect the western tradition of the wedding reception, although they are often on a bigger scale. Three hundred guests would be considered a small event. Most wedding parties also include bridesmaids, groomsmen, a best man, a pageboy and flower girls, but if you ask the couple what these roles actually represent, they are likely to shrug their shoulders. Traditional Arab features of the party included belly-dancing to Arabic music.

No Lebanese wedding is complete without the *barza*, the seating arrangement for the bride and bridegroom. They spend most of the night sitting on two single elaborately decorated upholstered chairs on an elevated platform or stage.

Both Tarek and I had been to many weddings. We wanted a more intimate celebration: dinner with our

families at a seafood restaurant. I would still wear a white wedding dress and Tarek would be in a tuxedo. But my parents were unhappy with our plan. They weren't used to the idea of a girl leaving home without a big party. People expected a show and my parents did too.

So I changed my mind. The party was more for them, but I have no regrets about sharing the day with all our relatives and friends.

Women Only

It looked like a typical wedding invitation. There was the standard: 'Mr and Mrs Riyad Masri together with Mr and Mrs Mohammad Malik request the pleasure of your company to the wedding of their son and daughter.'

But the fine print, in capital letters, carried an unexpected request: WOMEN ONLY.

I had been invited to my first segregated wedding.

I had heard of these weddings taking place in Middle Eastern countries but I didn't know anyone in Sydney who had celebrated their union apart. I have since discovered that it is a growing movement in Sydney's Islamic community, and it is taking place among second-generation Australians, some of whom are more conservative than their parents.

I attended the wedding with my mother, sister and two sisters-in-law.

There were about two hundred women at the reception hall, many of them in traditional Islamic dress. They wore abayas (long dresses or robes) in many different colours with decorative embroidery and sequins.

The hall's colour theme was pink and white. The ceiling was draped with white ribbons and a large net that hung over the dance floor was filled with pink and white balloons. The chairs were decorated with white and pink ribbons. The napkins on the round tables matched the ribbons on the chairs. A small gift was waiting for each guest – a bottle of perfume imported from the Middle East.

The bride entered the room to the beat of Arabic music, and she was accompanied by the groom, her father, brothers, four bridesmaids and several of the groom's close male friends.

She was wearing a full-length white cloak-style coat, with her hair carefully covered by the loosely hung hood. The groom was dressed in a tailored black suit with a top-hat and cane; the groomsmen also wore black suits but with pink handkerchiefs to match the bridesmaids' dresses.

Holding hands, the bride and her groom circled the dance floor and were introduced to the guests. The bride and groom then had the first dance. The men formed a circle around the newlyweds and clapped until the dance was over.

Ten minutes after they first entered the hall, the men headed back out the door. The women were only certain of this when the female DJ announced that all the men were gone. A female relative of the bride had been standing at the top of the stairs and she gave the thumbs

up to the DJ when the last man left.

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The DJ starts pumping the music. It's time for the women to party. The bride removes her coat to a room full of applause. She reveals a beautiful white lace strapless wedding dress. It has delicate embroidery on the bodice and curves into her waist and then flares out to a 2-metre train. Her hair is elegantly pinned up, with ringlets hanging softly around her face.

Before the women rush to the dance floor, they take off their headscarves and the long coats that cover their arms and legs. Many of them are in sleeveless or spaghetti-strap outfits. There are a lot of sparkles and shiny fabrics. The popular colours for the night are pink and blue. The women are wearing all the styles they couldn't wear in the presence of a man who is not their husband, father, brother, uncle or son.

I can't help thinking how white their skin is. It's probably because their bodies haven't been exposed to the sun for a long time. And I feel a bit overwhelmed by the women's enthusiasm to get to the dance floor. Some of them call out to their girlfriends to join them. There is much excitement and the room is full of happy women.

Some women, like my mum, keep their hijabs on. This is because they feel uncomfortable removing them outside the home even though they could now because there are only women around. After having a hijab on her head for more than twenty years, my mum says she feels naked without it.

Old and young are on the dance floor, although it takes some of the older ones longer to get excited about the music.

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Some young brides are choosing segregated weddings because they feel restricted in the presence of men. For them, this is about more freedom. At a typical wedding many of the women here wouldn't get up to dance in front of the men.

Under Islamic law, a woman should not dance in the presence of a male who is not her husband. But the rule is regularly flouted because most weddings are still held with both sexes present.

Many of the guests at this wedding were also at my wedding and because it was not segregated they didn't dance. They spent the night in their seats. This wedding's women-only theme extended to every aspect of the show. The photographer was a woman, as were the DJ and the waitresses.

Another difference between my wedding and this one was that this event wasn't videotaped. The women here had total freedom of movement because the fear that a man might come across the video was removed. And the women really let their hair down.

Then, an hour into the party, the DJ abruptly stopped the music and warned the women that they had five minutes to put their headscarves back on and any other pieces of clothing they had removed. Several men would

be entering the hall to set up a few extra tables for the late arrivals. The women scattered back to their seats and made the necessary adjustments. The room's atmosphere changed dramatically when the men entered. The women sat hushed in their seats, impatient for the men to finish their work.

'We were just getting into the party,' one woman complained. 'Why couldn't they ask a few of the women to get the tables and chairs?'

The men's eyes were downcast and it was obvious they were aware of how much their presence had disturbed the mood. When they were gone, the music quickly returned and the women stripped down to their party outfits once more.

I knew some of the women well and I never realised how much partying they had in them. They were laughing and chatting with their friends. They weren't the same tame women I had seen at other weddings. A few of them even danced on their tables. But these women also believed there was a time and a place for everything and only chose to dance and wear revealing clothing when men weren't around.

It wasn't just the women who were celebrating that night. While the groom had left the music and dancing to the women, he had opted for a quiet night with his closest friends. Some grooms have parties at their parents' place but my brothers informed me that the groom and a group of about fifteen guys went out for dinner that night.

The next time we saw the groom was four hours later,

when he returned to pick up his bride and the night had come to an end.

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I heard that the bride and groom spent their honeymoon in Malaysia, which has become a popular destination for young Muslim couples because of its Islamic character. Some resorts cater for Muslim couples and offer certain sports and special swimwear for women who wear the hijab.

What's in a Name?

When choosing a name for a newborn baby most parents consider their choice very carefully and bear in mind its importance in the school playground and in adult life. Naming a baby is a significant decision that parents have to make. But for Muslims, Islam is a major influence in naming practices, and the big collection of names taken from the Islamic tradition often serve as an inspiration. Most names in the Muslim world come from the Arabic language – the language of the holy book, the Koran.

A person's name is important in Islam because many social rules, such as marriage, inheritance and custody, depend on the blood relationship. For example, children always take their father's surname, but a Muslim who raises a child that is not his own must name the child after the natural father.

When it comes to traditional Muslim names, the most

popular is Muhammad – it can also be spelled Mohommed, Mohamed and Mohammad – after the Prophet, to whom the Koran (the final message from God) was revealed. The Prophet's name means 'highly praised' and it has an unassailable lead over all other names. The names of the Prophet's family, descendants and his early supporters are also popular, including Omar and Ali.

The Koran itself is an important source of names. Ibrahim and Mariam are two examples of names from the Koran that have English biblical equivalents (Abraham and Mary). While there is no one obvious leading name for a Muslim girl, Fatima, the name of one of the Prophet's daughters, is popular. So too is Aysha, the name of one of the Prophet's wives, and Zaynab, his daughter and granddaughter's name. The traditional Islamic monikers are listed in a growing number of books dedicated to Muslim baby names.

But there is another consideration for Muslims when it comes to names. It is Arab tradition for the eldest son to name his first son and daughter after his father and mother. This is not taken lightly and choosing to disregard this tradition can be perceived as disrespectful.

Many modern mums and dads continue the practice, as it is one way families choose to honour their parents. But some modern parents argue that times have changed and they do not live in an era where the honour-thy-parent naming agreement of previous generations should be followed.

Some Muslims have anglicised their Arabic names

because they want to avoid prejudice or discrimation, or they fear being targeted or harassed in the post-September 11 terrorist climate. Among the most common conversions are from Muhammad to Michael, Mustafa (also spelled Mustapha) to Steve, and Tarek (or Tariq or Tareq) to Terry. However, many do not make it official by registering the change.

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To all of his friends and workmates, he is Steve. But that's not the name he was born with. His real name is Mustafa, the name his parents gave him at birth.

Mustafa was born in Lebanon and came to Australia with his family in the late 1970s when he was six. He was to start school in Year 2 and had to attend an interview with his mother and older sister.

He was excited about going to school. During the interview with the family, the principal asked his name. His sister, who was acting as the interpreter, said that it was Mustafa.

Mustafa said, 'I remember the principal looking at us and you could tell she was thinking, "What is it? A disease? A food?" She was trying to pronounce it and it wouldn't come out and she turned to my mum and said, "How about you make it simple for him and change it to Steve?"'

But his mother was not impressed. 'She flipped out,' said Mustafa. 'She said in Arabic, "What do you mean change his name? God gave him his name."'

The principal advised that his name should be

changed to a less Arab-sounding one. They were told that if he kept his original name he would be picked on in the playground and the teachers would find it hard to pronounce.

All of Mustafa's old school reports carry the name Steve Mustafa Fashik. In his teens, Mustafa also discovered that his father, Mohommad, a devout Muslim, had had the name Mike imposed on him by his workmates.

When one of his father's workmates called out for Mike, Mustafa asked who he was after. The man had responded, 'Your dad, silly.'

Mustafa was shocked because he knew that his father was proud of his Islamic name and would never change it. When he asked his father why they didn't call him by his real name, his father replied that it was because the other workers couldn't pronounce it.

'When our parents say they really struggled when they first got here,' Mustafa said, 'believe them. They had to do it tough so that we could have it easy today.'

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Some Muslim women also choose to anglicise their names (Abir to Abby or Rukaya to Rachel). But there is another pressure when it comes to names. Lebanese women are expected to take their husband's surname after marriage, even though Islamically a woman is not required to do so.

Many years ago, Aziza stumbled across Islamic literature that outlined the rules about Muslim women changing their surname once they married. She was surprised to learn that a Muslim woman did not have to

take any other name than the one given to her at birth – her father's surname.

It was Aziza's understanding that it was an Islamic rule that a woman takes her husband's name once she marries. It is in fact Lebanese tradition to take a husband's name, not an Islamic rule, and it is a tradition that is practised in Western culture too. It is a patriarchal requirement, not a religious one, and it manifests itself in many cultures.

When she recently got married, Aziza made it clear to her husband that she would not be changing her surname. For Aziza, keeping her name was not just about being informed, it was her identity.

'I couldn't let go of my family name. For me, it was as if I would be disrespecting my parents,' she said.

On many occasions she has been forced to justify her decision. 'When I was engaged, my fiancé tried desperately to convince me to take on his family name,' she said. 'His argument was about family unity. He would say, "Don't you think it will be weird that you will have a different name to your children?"'

The pressure continued. Her husband asked, 'What am I supposed to say when people ask me why you haven't changed your name?'

Aziza was not upset by his questions but she didn't believe the arguments for changing her surname were valid. However, to appease her husband she considered hyphenating her name.

'Early on in our marriage the surname issue became a problem, but I have made it a non-issue,' she said. 'I pulled

out my Islamic literature and handed it to my husband and told him to argue with Islamic law.' The literature read, in part: *Dropping the wife's surname and giving her the husband's name is haram* (forbidden). *It's a form of falsehood and humiliation of the woman.*

The literature also suggested that a woman who had changed her name should put it right by going back to her father's name. Muslims believe that on the day of resurrection each person will be called by his or her natural name and be recognised as the son or daughter of so and so. Muslims are given their father's name because he is the protector and maintainer of the child and the mother.

In Islam, there is no blood tie between the husband and wife, so for her to take on his surname, as if she is part of his lineage, is wrong. A woman's inheritance and spending is also protected when she keeps her father's name.

Aziza has met many Muslims who are unaware of Islam's rules on surnames. A few of them have become better informed and reverted to their maiden names, even though their husbands disapprove.

While Aziza's husband has stopped arguing with her about his surname, she knows the issue will flare again. She is adamant, however, that she will remain Aziza Samad. 'It's my identity,' she says.

The Road to Conversion

> *Ash-hadu an laa illaha illaallah wa ash-hadu anna Muhammadan abduhu wa rasooluhallah.*
>
> (I testify and witness there is no god worthy of being worshipped other than Allah and I testify and witness that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.)

With these words, Mary-anne accepts Islam. The young woman is standing before a sheikh with a group of other people who have just mouthed the same words. This process is known as *Shahada*, or accepting Islam. It is a commitment made between the person and Allah, and it is one of the five pillars of Islam. Shahada doesn't necessarily have to take place before a religious leader, however, many people choose to do it in a formal gathering and to celebrate afterwards.

Mary-anne was first introduced to Islam through her boyfriend, Ibrahim. During the first few years of their relationship they never discussed religion, so Mary-anne's only source of information about Islam was the media.

'I come from a family where religion didn't matter,' she said. 'We celebrated Easter and Christmas because it was tradition. One time I told Ibrahim that he should be thanking me for the public holidays.'

Mary-anne and Ibrahim met in 2001 and dated for more than a year before religion was raised in a conversation. Ibrahim's parents were initially unaware of his relationship with Mary-anne. But after he told them that he wanted to marry her, she was introduced to them. His family accepted Mary-anne into their life. Some Muslims are sceptical of people who convert to Islam because of their relationship with a Muslim man or woman. There tends to be a question mark about the level of commitment and uncertainty about whether that person will continue to be a Muslim if the relationship disintegrates. A Muslim man can marry a non-Muslim woman (although she must be a practising Christian or Jew), and she doesn't have to change her religion as long as the children are raised with Islamic guidance.

Mary-anne embraced Islam because she believed in it and not because of her relationship with Ibrahim. She made the Shahada at a time when Islam was being portrayed in some sections of the media as a religion that breeds terrorists.

Mary-anne first started to take an interest in Islam a few months before she married Ibrahim in a traditional

religious service. She had been introduced to Islam slowly. Ibrahim would bring home pamphlets about the religion's basic principles. Initially, Mary-anne wasn't interested. 'I would read it and put it away,' she said.

The turning point was when Ibrahim gave her an Islamic children's book to read. 'We were coming back from the football and I was reading it,' said Mary-anne. 'There was a line in it that said Jesus wasn't the son of God, and I started crying. Ibrahim was confused.'

Mary-anne says that was the moment she realised she wanted to be a Muslim. She felt a strong connection to what she was reading and started to question what she had been taught about Jesus as a child.

The next day Mary-anne went to her local library to borrow some books on Islam. She wanted to do her own research. Three months later, she made the decision to convert. 'When I first took the Shahada, people around me couldn't believe it,' she said. 'They thought I was doing it just so that Ibrahim would marry me, and some even thought I was being brainwashed.'

Mary-anne understood that becoming a Muslim meant making changes to her life. There would be no more after-work drinks with colleagues or going to nightclubs.

It hasn't been easy, and Mary-anne admits there were times when she questioned whether she was doing the right thing. Her family also found it hard to accept the change, even though they weren't religious. 'This was totally foreign to them,' she said. 'My parents thought that it would mean I would turn my back on them. They were

scared they were going to lose me. But my mother and sister are pretty open-minded and have accepted my decision. My father, on the other hand, well… he believes in God and that's as far as he will go.'

As time went on, Mary-anne's family started to comment on the positive changes they saw in her. She was more patient and attentive. Mary-anne attributes these changes to her new faith.

At family gatherings Mary-anne's relatives always have a lot of questions for her. She gives them books about Islam because they say they want to learn more about it.

Mary-anne doesn't wear the hijab but says she wants to stop wearing short-sleeve tops and tight clothes. 'There are beautiful clothes that I can't wear because they are too revealing. It's hard not to be seduced by all the advertising, but as a Muslim I have to remember to separate myself from it. You can't have this state of mind and this sort of willpower overnight. It's a long process.'

Mary-anne once took her mother to a lecture by an established Islamic speaker. She says her mother was surprised to learn there were similarities between Islam and other religions.

'My father is Dutch and came to Australia when he was two,' said Mary-anne. 'My mother was born in Australia and so were her ancestors. She is Anglican and my dad is Christian. When I was a child, my parents would ask my sister and me if we wanted to go to church. We went to a Presbyterian Church and were baptised.'

Mary-anne's mother reminded her of this when she

told her she wanted to convert. But Mary-anne believes that she probably wouldn't have been so open-minded about Islam had her parents not helped instil some religious faith.

Converts are also known as reverts, as Muslims believe that every human is born a Muslim. Women who revert often point to the strong sense of sisterhood as one of the benefits of being a Muslim.

Mary-anne has become friends with a Muslim colleague, Mayada. 'The only Muslims I knew before meeting Mayada were my husband's family,' said Mary-anne. But she realised that she needed the friendship of a Muslim person outside the family. As the women's friendship grew, Mary-anne was invited to Mayada's home to break her fast during Ramadan. 'I couldn't believe the hospitality,' she said.

For Mary-anne, Ramadan was the most enlightening time in her life. But she is taking one step at a time and hasn't learned how to pray yet. 'Going to the mosque during Ramadan and being around people with such strong faith helped me,' she said.

Mary-anne converted to Islam a few months after the terrorist bombings in Bali. Like all Australians, she was horrified by the attack. But Mary-anne is angry that some people blamed Islam for the criminal action. 'How can a religion that has a greeting like *Assalaamu alaikum* (Peace be with you) be to blame for the bombings?' she asked. 'I knew enough about Islam at that stage to not question my faith in it.'

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Jamila Hussain is another convert to Islam. In 1968, Australia was buzzing with news of a visit by the American evangelist, Billy Graham. Jamila was in her final year of high school and remembers the tour being treated as 'a great event'. 'Thousands of people wanted to see Graham, and there was music and lights and everyone went up on stage and declared themselves saved by believing in Jesus.'

Until then, Jamila hadn't thought much about religion. She grew up in Sydney with Anglo parents, who she describes as 'not very religious'. Jamila traces her ancestors to 1802, when they came to Australia as convicts.

She couldn't get excited about Graham's 'crusade'. 'Everyone in class was getting on the bus and going off to Sydney to be saved by Graham,' she said, 'and I thought there must be something wrong with me because I wasn't at all enthusiastic about it.'

So Jamila decided to study Graham's message. 'The more I thought about it the more I came to the conclusion that I didn't believe it,' she said. 'When I read some church history I found that a lot of these church doctrines were introduced into Christian theology well after the death of Christ.'

Ironically, Jamila credits Graham with setting her on the path to becoming a Muslim. She met her husband, a Chinese Muslim, while studying at university. Jamila says that while her husband was a Muslim – 'and nothing

would change that' – he wasn't particularly well-informed about his religion. For the first twenty years of their marriage, Jamila sat on the religious fence. 'I didn't convert for a long time,' she said.

Jamila admits that at first she didn't find some of the things she was hearing about Muslim women appealing. For example, she had a problem with the notion that she wouldn't be considered 'a good Muslim' until she wore the hijab. 'I couldn't see myself wearing it,' she said. 'I considered myself a feminist.'

In the late 1980s, Jamila decided to convert. 'It was good that my parents weren't religious because they were not upset by my changing religions.' The conversion involved making the Shahada.

Jamila wanted to learn more about Islam, so she packed up her family and headed to Malaysia. For two years she taught common law while learning *Sharia*, Islamic law. She gained a Master's degree in comparative law at the International Islamic University in Malaysia and now lectures in Islamic law at the University of Technology in Sydney.

Jamila says she didn't expect to get any social benefits from her conversion, but was surprised when she did. 'Muslim women are such good friends,' she says. 'It seems silly, but I really have many more friends in the Muslim community than I have ever had in my own.'

But every community has its challenges. Jamila would like English to be used more in mosques in Australia, as many second- and third-generation Muslims can't read or

write Arabic. In fact, many can only speak conversational Arabic. The Koran is the book of sacred writings that is read by Muslims. Muslims believe its revelations were made to the Prophet Muhammad by Allah. The Koran was written in the Arabic language, but many Muslims do not come from Arabic-speaking backgrounds. Some of them learn Arabic to read the Koran in its official language, while others rely on translations.

Most mosques in Australia are divided along ethnic lines. Jamila wants Muslims in Australia to 'stop huddling in their little ethnic groups and start working for the good of all Australian Muslims.'

Since Mary-anne had a baby, her husband's interest in Islam has grown. She says Ibrahim works with her every day to develop their knowledge about the religion they share.

For Mary-anne, being a Muslim is now a way of life. 'I never imagined rules could make me so happy,' she said. 'There are answers for everything.'

From Sydney to Mecca

To enter you must be a Muslim. And if you are, you must visit at least once in your lifetime.

Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and home to the holy cities of Mecca (also known as Makkah) and Medina. The pilgrimage to Mecca – or *Hajj* – is one of the five pillars of Islam (or basic duties of a Muslim). It is a spiritual journey that many Muslims aspire to, and it is compulsory if you are healthy and can afford it.

Although Islam encourages Muslims to make the journey as soon as they are able, the Hajj is often seen as a commitment made by the elderly. Women who make the journey gain the affectionate title of *hajja*, while the men become known as *hajji*.

At twenty-six, Yasmin is not typical of her age group, having made the minor form of worship, the *Umrah*. 'The

whole experience was overwhelming,' she said. 'It was one of my biggest achievements.'

Generally, the Umrah is taken by younger Muslims who see it as a stepping stone to the Hajj. The Islamic community expects that a person who has undertaken the Hajj has committed to being the best Muslim they can be.

A Muslim can perform the Umrah even after having undertaken the Hajj. However, one of the biggest differences between the two is that the Hajj is obligatory for every able adult. The Hajj must be performed from the eighth day to the thirteenth day of the twelfth month of the Islamic lunar calendar; the Umrah can be done at any time of the year.

Hajj is a form of worship. It also demonstrates the unity of all believers of the Islamic faith when millions of Muslims from around the world gather at the same place, at the same time, doing the same acts as prescribed in the Koran.

Mecca is the holiest city of Islam. It is located around a desert oasis and it was there that the teachings of a man called Muhammad first came to light. Mecca is the birthplace of the Prophet. Muslims believe the words of the Koran are those of Allah (God), passed to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel.

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Yasmin didn't learn about religion from her parents. In kindergarten, her best friend's parents would travel to Saudi Arabia every year for the Umrah. 'That's how it all

started,' said Yasmin. 'I never saw my parents praying when I was growing up.'

Yasmin was the eldest of six children and the only girl. She had a lot of responsibility from an early age. At twelve, Yamin started praying at home and she was able to convince one of her brothers, Ali, to pray as well.

She wasn't strict about her prayers and often skipped some of the sessions. But by the time she was sixteen she was committed to fulfilling her five daily prayers. Her parents never discouraged it.

When Yasmin got married at eighteen her husband's work took them to country New South Wales. She immersed herself in her university studies but began to feel she was growing distant from her religion. 'I was away from the Lebanese community and the culture. Being away from that made it harder for me to practise. I needed to share my religion with somebody.'

Yasmin persevered. She continued fasting during the holy month of Ramadan and carrying out her daily prayers. She also started taking Arabic lessons because she wanted to read the Koran in the language in which it was revealed to the Prophet.

The more Yasmin read about Islam, the more interested she became in the stories of the different prophets. One of her favourites was about the Prophet Ibrahim and how he helped build the Ka'bah (or House of God), the shrine in the courtyard of the Great Mosque in Mecca. It is considered by Muslims to be the most sacred spot on Earth. 'It's a treasure,' said Yasmin.

Every time a Muslim prays, anywhere in the world, they must orient themselves towards the shrine. The cube-shaped shrine, which has been destroyed, damaged and rebuilt over the centuries, contains nothing but the three pillars supporting the roof and some suspended lamps. The Ka'bah is covered with an enormous black pure silk cloth, which is 14 metres high, to match the height of the Ka'bah, and 47 metres wide, enough to cover the four sides. The cloth has Koranic verses inscribed in gold-plated silver threads.

Every Muslim who makes the pilgrimage must walk around the Ka'bah seven times, during which he or she kisses, touches or points to the Black Stone in one of its corners. Many Muslims have an image of the Ka'bah, with millions of pilgrims gathered around it, hanging on a wall in their homes.

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Yasmin became excited about visiting Mecca when her best friend, Amar, also her sister-in-law, suggested they do the Umrah. Both women agreed to discuss the idea with their husbands.

'I had this unrelenting urge to go,' said Yasmin. But her husband, Omar, was surprised. 'What? Where is this coming from?' he asked.

Yasmin explained that it was something that had been building up for a while. With her weekly Arabic lesson and religion class, Omar had noticed that Yasmin was becoming more devout. He told her that he would not

stand in her way but that he wouldn't be able to go with her because he had work commitments. 'I had work commitments too,' said Yasmin, 'but I thought, stuff it, this is a good opportunity.'

Omar's decision to stay behind created another challenge for his wife. Women travelling to Mecca need to be accompanied by a *mahram* – a woman's husband or a legally approved male companion to whom marriage is prohibited. It is recommended that a woman travel with a mahram for safety and protection. There are exceptions to the rule. For example, groups of women can travel together without a male companion. Still, there is debate in the Muslim community about the unfairness of such a restriction on women, and arguments that it is a Saudi-imposed directive and not a Koranic one.

Yasmin's brother agreed to go with her: he was to be her mahram. Yasmin also decided to take her daughter, Layaal, who was only eighteen months old at the time. 'I was so excited,' she said. 'I was a bit hesitant about taking Layaal because I'd heard it's so hot and crowded. I thought I might be putting her in danger, but then I thought, hey, I'm going to the holiest place on Earth. I felt like I needed to take her with me, and it was the best thing I ever did because she looks at pictures of the Ka'bah and says, "Mum, I went there." And she remembers going on the camels.'

Yasmin got little support when she told her family that she was going to Saudi Arabia to perform the Umrah. Instead, there were a lot of questions and puzzled faces. 'They looked at me and said, "But you're not wearing a

hijab" and "You're so young." It was like, "Your dad doesn't even pray,"' she said.

Yasmin thought it was unfair that her religious devotion was being judged on the depth of her father's commitment to the faith. Ignorance breeds such perceptions. It is not a condition that women who go to Mecca have to be already wearing the hijab or that they must continue wearing it at the end of their Hajj or Umrah. It is encouraged, of course, but not forced. Most women who travel to Mecca do return wearing it, although many of them are elderly.

In Saudi Arabia, Yasmin wore the hijab all the time. She was comfortable with it and began to seriously contemplate keeping it on. She had had these thoughts before the trip. She liked wearing the hijab at home while she prayed or in class during her religion lesson, but being in the holy land made her feel more strongly about it. 'I thought I would come back from the Hajj and leave the hijab on and everything would be glorious,' she said.

There was much to do to prepare for the Umrah. First, Yasmin had to find the right clothes to wear. This was not a holiday, so jeans and tops were out. Yasmin shopped for outfits with her sister-in-law but they didn't find what they were looking for. One shop offering Islamic clothing had abayas on display but they were made of a heavy fabric that would not be suitable for the climate.

Yasmin and Amar decided to make their own clothes. They found it was easier to buy plain white cotton

material and to sew some long veils and white dresses with long sleeves. The garments had to be simple and the colour and material were designed to keep them as cool as possible.

Yasmin's to-do list included selecting verses from the Koran that she would be required to recite during the trip. Her intention (*neeyyah*, in Arabic) for doing the Umrah had to be pure. She had to be going for the right reasons. The more mundane requirements included clipping short her fingernails for cleanliness.

Yasmin was confident that the trip would change her for the better. 'I was going to come back cleansed of all my mistakes,' she said. 'Isn't that amazing?'

Yasmin had never travelled so far before and had never been to the Middle East. 'When I told people at work I was going to Saudi Arabia they asked me if I was crazy. They said, "It's a dangerous country."' Despite the region's volatility, Yasmin had no fears about travelling to Saudi Arabia. She spent twelve days there with a group that included her brother and her sister-in-law.

'I had never seen so many people and traffic in the one place before and it was so disorganised,' said Yasmin. "Where is the line?" I asked. 'And I was told, "There is no line."'

Her first impression of Mecca: 'It was like Chinatown. It was so chaotic. And it was so hot I couldn't breathe.' Her thirst was quenched by drinking water from a well located near the Ka'bah, called Zamzam. Muslims believe the well is the source of healing and thirst-quenching

water, and that it was used by Hagar, the mother of Prophet Ibrahim's son, Ismael. Yasmin said the water left a sweet aftertaste in her mouth. The water is available from water dispensers in the mosque. Yasmin would fill her bottles and take them back to her hotel. At the end of her trip she filled up water canisters and took them back home to give to family and friends.

There were many challenges to overcome in the first few days. 'We were agitated and hungry and we had to worry about the kids. I told myself we shouldn't be feeling like this because we're in the holy land.' Throughout the trip Yasmin had to be in a state of purification, mentally and physically. She had to maintain her personal hygiene, be convinced she was there for the right reasons, and be able to let go of any negative thoughts that might make her Umrah unacceptable to God.

There are different practices for fulfilling Umrah and specific duties for carrying out Hajj. Among the duties to be performed for the Umrah are walking around the Ka'bah seven times in an anti-clockwise direction,walking between the hills of *Safa* (purity) and *Marwa* (quenching), and trimming one's hair at the end of the Umrah.

During her stay in Mecca, Yasmin would rise early to be at the Great Mosque (Masjid al-Haram) by 4.30 am for the start of morning prayers. When the adhan, or call to prayer, was heard over the loudspeakers in the streets, the pilgrims all headed in the same direction. 'It gave me goosebumps,' Yasmin said.

The coolness of the mosque offered respite from the

intense heat outside. The mosque, a brick building surrounded by high walls, can hold more than 300 000 people. Bags are checked at the door by security guards. Located inside the mosque are the Ka'bah and the sacred well of Zamzam. Women and men enter through different doors and pray separately. However, there are no curtains or barriers separating the worshippers and Yasmin says that men, women and children moved around freely.

'Everything was so hot. But sitting in there, it was like I had no worries in the world. I felt so safe and at peace. I didn't think of anyone. All I wanted was to be at peace with myself and be close to God.'

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Every year, television footage of the Hajj is beamed around the world. The image that usually gets most people talking is of the millions of pilgrims, sardine-like, pushing and shoving to make it to the Ka'bah. Not all of them get there. Yasmin had only ever seen the Ka'bah in pictures, but now she was about 40 metres away from it. And she was mesmerised. 'I couldn't get my eyes off it,' she said. 'I didn't know what to think or say or feel; I was trying to comprehend it all. I was shaking, not because I was scared but because I was excited. Then I started praying for everyone I knew, for forgiveness of my sins and guidance, and especially for my daughter to live with *iman* (faith).'

At the end of her trip Yasmin didn't want to take off the hijab. Omar wasn't happy about it when she told him. He worried about the effect it would have on her safety and work opportunities back home in Sydney. 'I didn't

share his concerns,' she said. 'I was ready to confront everyone and anything.' At the same time she didn't want to cause problems in her marriage. 'I know that eventually I will wear the hijab,' said Yasmin.

The pilgrimage changed her forever, not just emotionally but in her approach to daily life. She is now more focused when she carries out her prayers and is more knowledgeable about Islam because of her reading. 'I have become so much more patient with everyone. Every time I read something new about Islam I want to apply it to my daily life.'

For a long time Yasmin had wanted to pray at work and going to Mecca forced her into action. When she got back to work she talked to her employer about it and he didn't have a problem.

Yasmin works in information technology, a male-dominated field, and used to take coffee and lunch breaks with her male colleagues. She now prefers not to do it without another woman present.

'I just don't feel comfortable about it anymore,' she said. 'It's not that I think the men have bad intentions, but I just want to avoid uncertainty. Even though it's innocent, some people might take it the wrong way and I don't want to be put in that situation.'

Yasmin hopes that some of her commitment to Islam will rub off on her husband and her parents. More than anything, she wants them to start praying.

'Our life is so focused on material stuff,' she said.

Afterword

We might have started out with a few *nevers* to our names but we've made up some ground over the years. And now we have some *firsts* to add: We are the first in our families to go to university, the first to travel overseas and the first to write a book.

Despite the trying events of the past few years, our religion and culture have given us strength and great discipline and we have never thought about giving it up for something else. It is who we are. Our greatest *jihad*, or struggle, is to overcome our weaknesses and to better ourselves. We are reminded of one of the Koranic verses, 'Embrace every aspect of peace.' In the process of writing this book we have learned a lot about our religion, and that's what we want to keep doing – learning.

Our cultural reference points might be different in some areas, for example, our parents didn't read us fairytales

at bedtime, but we don't feel that we have missed out. We are rich in other ways, such as having a second language.

Taghred Chandab: Reliving some of my childhood experiences in this book has given me a new sense of respect for my parents. I used to take them for granted and would often blame them for not letting me be a regular teenager – whatever that means. I have a better understanding now of why they were so strict. They came to a foreign country with very little and had to build their lives from scratch. That isn't easy to do. And they feared what they didn't know. They did the best they could under the circumstances.

When I was younger I tended to isolate myself from the Lebanese Muslim community. Now I am the first to put my hand up and say I am a Muslim. I attend weekly Arabic and scripture lessons and wish I had listened to my parents when they pleaded with me to go to Arabic school when I was a girl. I thank God my parents chose to make Australia their home and to make it mine. Nothing can compare to living in Australia and being an Australian.

Nadia Jamal: One of the things I value most about being Australian is the religious tolerance and freedom of religious expression. I am blessed to live in a country where religion is not imposed on a person and where everyone is free to practise their faith in a peaceful way.

The past few years in particular have been a period of soul-searching for many Muslims, both at an individual

and community level. I do not think that as an Australian-born Muslim I should be torn between my faith and patriotism. I believe I can be true to both, and I shouldn't have to choose between the two. I also think we should be able to publicly disagree with people in the Muslim community without being accused of being un-Islamic. Islam understands democracy and guarantees me my right to present and discuss an opinion.

Yes, from time to time I have doubts about where I fit, but who doesn't? My connection to Islam has deepened, compared with the time before the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States. The past few years have made me think more about my religion; what it means and how it defines me. I am among a growing number of Australian Muslims who have been prompted to search for a deeper understanding of their religion. My religion has always been strongly linked to identity and community.

Among my circle of friends of second-generation Australians, I have noticed that they are identifying with their migrant parents' religious beliefs more than their parents do. It's no longer unusual to see a young, Australian-born Muslim woman wearing the headscarf walking alongside her mother who doesn't. And more Muslims are studying their religion because they are then in a better position to defend it against criticism. My hope is that as we become better informed, we will reflect the true essence of Islam and show Islam's compassionate and peace-loving side. For Muslims, life in this world is but a stage; we live for what comes after.

There is a fear of Islam but I know when you meet Muslim people you will mostly find them to be friendly and generous. Once, on a train trip, I noticed a man in my carriage reading a pocket-size Koran. That image made me smile, and it reminded me of the words of an Arab personality: 'To each his faith, but the nation is for all.'

I am proud to be an Australian, proud to be a Muslim and proud of my Lebanese heritage. A few years ago when I wrote about my religion in a newspaper column, I received a beautiful handwritten letter from a man named Ian Gillespie. His words touched me, and I would like to share some of them with you.

Dear Nadia,
After reading your article this morning, interpreting the heart of Islam in contrast to the various misconceptions that we Australians have too easily believed, I just wanted to tell you of my appreciation of the enlightenment that your article brings.

I can see that Islam is a religion of peace. Like the other religions of the One God it is too often perverted by people of fixed opinions.

The youth of Australia, Muslim, Christian and Jew are the hope for a good future as I read through your article.

With my grateful thanks,
Yours Sincerely,
Ian Gillespie (age 92)

Thank you, Ian.